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DASHING DAVE, THE DANDY DETECTIVE;

Or, The League of the Secret Brotherhood.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER," "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER," "WILL WILDFIRE," "DARK PAUL," ETC., ETC.



"IF HE DIES WE WILL DIE TOGETHER!" SHE EXCLAIMED.

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CHAPTER I.

A DOUBLE CAPTURE.

It was a handsome man and a beautiful woman who walked side by side in the dusk of a May evening, along a lonely street in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

Hers was one of those soft, pearl and rose tinged faces, which one sees oftener in the work of the artist than in real life. She was dressed in simple costume, but her robe hung about her delicate form with a grace which no costly attire could have emulated. It was of a soft, amber tint, which comported well with the tone of her complexion.

The gentleman seemed to be somewhat of an exquisite in his dress, and in the curl of his long mustache, and the dainty cane which he twirled lightly as he walked. Yet there was something resolute in his handsome face, and his springy form indicated agility and strength, as he trod lightly by the side of his beautiful companion.

They had been conversing in a tone of gossipy lightness, laughing merrily now and then at some amusing remark. But, as the evening deepened, and the avenue became deserted, they fell into a more serious strain of talk.

It is hardly correct, however, to speak of the avenue as deserted. There were several persons on it, yet, whose attention seemed closely directed to this unconscious couple. One of these was a stout, whiskered man, who lounged quietly along at no great distance behind them. On the other side of the street, in the shadow of a hedge which bordered the grounds of a fine mansion, was a group of men, who seemed as if anxious to conceal themselves from the notice of the others.

Evidently there was some game afloat that would need time for its development.

But the gentleman and lady seemed heedless or unaware of this surveillance. Their tones sunk lower as they continued to talk, but not from any fear of being overheard.

"I cannot," she earnestly said, in reply to some remark of his. "I hope you will not ask me again. There are reasons."

"There are dozens of reasons why you should," he answered. "I do not know what queer idea you have of keeping faith with a gang of villains. But, think of the sorrow in that desolate household; of the anguish of those poor parents; and of all the pain and trouble this has caused. Will you put against all this some foolish notion of keeping faith with a set of cut-throats?"

"No, no!" she cried hastily. "It is not that! It is not that! I dare not speak! And I could not if I would. I do not know what you want to discover."

"You know more than you are willing to admit," was his stern and cold rejoinder.

"Very well, sir," she angrily replied. "Yet I did not expect, after all that has passed, to be insulted by you in return." Then, with a sudden change of manner, she continued. "Here, here! This is my only link with them! Take it! take it! I cut loose from all connection with them. You may have all the good you can find in it."

She hastily removed a ring from her finger and thrust it nervously into his hand, with a frightened look around as she did so.

"If I could only cut loose from all the past as easily," she continued. "Guard it well. I dare say nothing more, but it may aid you in your search."

He looked curiously at the small golden circlet that lay in his palm. What there could be in this ring, whose minute seal, as he could see by the dim light, bore a strange device, he could not imagine.

"Conceal it!" she nervously cried. "You are upon a perilous path, where a thousand dangers may lurk. That sign may help you in some critical peril. You do not know what a risk I run in giving it to you. Do not lose it, for your life!"

His eyes were fixed coldly upon the ring. There was something incredulous in his expression.

"If you really put yourself in danger by this," he quietly answered, "do you imagine that I will take it from you? It is an empty bauble to me. If of use to you keep it."

"I will not!" she passionately replied. "The race I spring from is one that never takes back a gift." She tore from him the hand he had taken, with intent to place the mysterious ring on one of its slender fingers.

"Well, if you will have it so," he indifferently replied, as he dropped the ring into his vest pocket. "But do not fancy that I am to be satisfied with a mystery like this, Lucille. You must and shall say more."

"Must and shall are strong words, sir." She drew herself up to her full height, and stood in the path beside him, her nostrils dilated with pride, a flash of defiance in her eyes.

"Must and shall, I repeat!" he angrily responded, seizing her wrist in his strong gripe, and looking into her face with a gaze of unflinching resolution.

"Unhand me, sir!"

She endeavored to wrench her wrist from his grasp, but she could as well have torn it loose from an iron fetter. His angry impulse lasted but a second, however, and then he released her himself, with a sense of shame upon his well-cut features.

A laugh of scorn broke from her lips.

"Did you for a moment imagine that what I would not tell you freely you could force from me by violence?" she bitterly asked. "I see you did not know me. Return my ring, sir. I prefer to keep it myself."

He made no answer, but drew a handkerchief from his pocket, with which he wiped his lips. With the cane in his right hand he slowly traced lines in the path on which they stood.

At this moment the man who lurked behind them started quickly forward, almost as if he had taken the handkerchief as a signal.

In a minute he was beside them. They turned at the crunching of his feet on the gravel of the walk, and saw through the gathering dusk the outlines of a portly, whiskered man, with a face of resolute force.

"You are Mr. David Darnly?" he said, in a questioning tone.

"That is my name," was the quiet answer.

"And this lady is Lucille Ernestine?"

"Precisely. And what now?"

"Simply that you are both my prisoners," and he laid a firm hand on the shoulder of each.

"Ha!" cried Mr. Darnly, flinging off his grasp and starting angrily back. "How dare you, sirrah? What is your authority for this outrage? Unhand that lady, or by Heaven I will make you bitterly rue it!"

"I arrest you as accessories in the abduction of Clarence Thorndike," was the firm and cold response. "My authority is that of a member of the Philadelphia detective force. You had best come quietly, my man, for I mean business. I have been shadowing the pair of you for a week on this 'job.'

"The deuce you have!" answered Darnly, quickly. "The idea of pursuing me as an accomplice in that business," he continued, laughingly, as he looked into the face of the lady, who had grown very pale. "What if I refuse to be arrested on such a charge?"

"We have means of persuasion," returned the officer, as he drew a pistol from his pocket. "If you refuse a minute longer, my man, I will put the darbies on you and take you into town in that fashion."

A laugh of amusement broke from Darnly's lips.

"You are a true policeman," he said. "Come, we will go with you. You have tried the pistol on me. You will be trying the blackjack on the lady next. It is a ridiculous business all through, but I suppose you are only doing your duty. Come, Miss Ernestine, we must accompany this honest gentleman, it seems."

Had the lady been looking toward them she might have detected a look of intelligence between Mr. Darnly and the officer. But it passed unobserved by her, and she nervously took the arm he proffered her, with a trembling lip and a deep pallor upon her beautiful face.

"You will not need to walk far," said the officer. "I have a carriage waiting in the next street. I knew your ways, you perceive, and prepared for you."

A faint gasp came from Lucille's lips. Darnly turned, with a look in his face as if he was inclined to strike the burly officer.

"No, no!" she cried, clinging to his arm. "We will go with him! We must!"

A peculiar sense of pleasure shot through Darnly's breast. There was something in her

tone as if it was for him she feared, not for herself. Had the woman's heart then turned to him, as he half wished it might, half dreaded it would?

But at this moment there was a sudden quick rush. The men who had been lurking in the shadow of the hedge across the road had broken loose from their covert, and ran quickly toward the group of the detective and his prisoners.

The sound of their feet had not been audible at first in the soft earth. They were nearly upon them before they were observed. Then the officer hastily turned and made an effort to draw his pistol. But before he could do so he was grasped by strong hands, and flung roughly to the ground.

He was not stunned, however, and the sound of a shrill whistle rung through the air, as he put a small instrument to his lips.

"Ha! Burst that bound's brain-pan!" cried a stern voice. "He will bring the cops down on us."

A blow with the butt of a pistol answered this order, and left the unlucky officer insensible upon the path.

Meanwhile Miss Ernestine had been rudely seized, a quick scream coming from her lips as she strove to escape from the hands which had grasped her. Another of the attacking group caught Darnly by the collar. But he, for one, reckoned without his host. For, with a quick movement, Darnly grasped his assailant by the breast and tripped up his heels, dropping him with a heavy thud on the path beside him. At the same instant he leaped upon the man who held Lucille, and struck straight and strong at his face. No one would have looked for any great strength in the rather slender form of the young gentleman, yet the burly fellow went down before him as if he had been struck by a pile-driver.

"Villains!" he exclaimed, facing the other two. "How dare you attack this lady? I will protect her with my life!"

The two men drew back a little. It was not safe to approach fists so prompt and strong as his had proved to be. The heavy fall of their comrade made them cautious.

But at this moment Lucille caught his arm with nervous dread. Ere he could release himself the two men were upon him, and the one he had first tripped rose from the ground and seized his free arm from behind.

The odds were too great. In less than a minute after the first assault he was a prisoner in their hands, his wrists firmly bound in a pair of light handcuffs which had been quickly slipped upon them.

"The carriage!" came in the quick tones of the leader of the assaulting party. "There are footsteps. That fool's whistle has given the alarm. Hurry to the carriage! It is just round the corner. We must thank our friend, the officer, for being so kind as to provide it."

The two prisoners in these new and strange hands were forced rapidly forward. Mr. Darnly made a moment's resistance, and was about to cry for help, when he felt the cold ring of a pistol-barrel pressed upon his temple.

"A word, and you are a dead man!" came in harsh accents. "Do you fancy that we are the sort of men to be played with? And you, my lady—you know us well enough to know the value of a still tongue just now."

Lucille looked ready to faint as she was hurried forward. She evidently feared some terrible result from this capture. The arrest by the officer had brought no such deathly pallor to her face as now gave her lips their ashy whiteness.

But Darnly's face was stern, cold and resolute. He was one of those men whose hidden qualities are called forth by stress of peril. Foppish as he seemed in his dress and ordinary bearing, there was no trace of fear upon his countenance. He stepped into the carriage when it was brought up as lightly as though he was going out for an evening's pleasure.

"Quick!" cried the leader. "Here come the cops! Drive like Jehu!"

He and another had entered the carriage with their prisoners. The remaining two leaped upon the box. The shrill sound of a policeman's rattle rung behind them as they grasped the reins and plied the horses with the whip.

"Stop!" came in an authoritative tone, as the horses sprang into full speed.

A mocking laugh was the only response. A sharp crack, and a pistol bullet passed through the rim of the driver's hat. But he and his companion only stooped lower, and plied the whip more keenly. The furious horses sprung forward, and the carriage disappeared in the gathering darkness of the night.

There were a half-dozen men in the group which had hastily gathered.

"Here lies a chap," cried one of them, "dead or senseless."

"He is not dead, at any rate," replied another, as the discomfited officer moved uneasily and gave vent to a hollow groan. He was coming back to his senses.

CHAPTER II.

TOM PARSONS'S STORY.

"By the seven saints but it was a narrow squeak! The fellow has a cast-iron hand, and if he'd struck with a heavier weapon it would have been all day with Tom Parsons."

The speaker was the burly officer who had been dropped by a pistol stock the night before. He gave a sour grimace as he rubbed the sore spot on his head.

"He struck hard, then?"

"Hard? You bet. A premium mule couldn't have kicked harder. I believe I was stone-dead for a good half-hour, for I certainly smelt brimstone. Maybe it was that skeered the life back into me again."

His companion laughed.

"I know you could never stand hot weather," he said. "I wouldn't like to be in your boots when you do come to kick the bucket.—But this is a devilish awkward job about Dave. What does it mean, anyhow? Who were those chaps, and what was their object in capturing Dave and the girl?"

"You've got me there," answered Tom. "There's something confoundedly mysterious about the whole business. The villains must have smelt out our game, and played trump on us before we could call in our tricks. But if they don't find that they've caught a hornet in Dave Darnly, then I'm no judge of horse-flesh."

The two speakers were in an office of the central police station of Philadelphia, Tom Parsons's companion being a good-looking, finely built fellow, who held the position of Lieutenant of police. He was known throughout the force as Lieutenant Hill, of the Reserves.

"You think that they are the child-stealers?" he asked.

"I am sure of it."

"Then Mr. Thorndike had better be posted at once. He knows of our project. We must let him know of its failure. Take your hat, and run out there at once, Tom. We must try and hunt up Dave, and he may suggest something. He is wide-awake, and has given some good suggestions before now."

Tom hastened to comply with this advice, and in a few minutes had left the office.

The residence of Mr. Allen Thorndike, to which we was making his way, was a very handsome mansion, situated out of the closely built up portion of the city, and surrounded by beautifully kept and ornamented grounds.

On the morning in question its richly furnished parlor was occupied by Mr. Thorndike, a gentleman of some forty years of age, his wife, a handsome middle-aged lady, and his daughter, a beautiful girl of about seventeen.

But despite the cheerful aspect of the room, there seemed a dark cloud upon all present. Mrs. Thorndike looked as if some sorrow had added twenty years to her age, while an expression of settled gloom dwelt upon her husband's face.

"It is now more than a year," he sadly said. "I thought we would grow more resigned with time, yet every new day seems only to make our loss heavier."

"But he will—he must come back, Allen!" answered his wife, in a plaintive accent. "They could not have had the heart to injure him, our darling son!"

Mr. Thorndike gravely shook his head.

"Oh! do not do that, papa!" cried the young lady, springing up and clasping his arm. "Clarence must be found! He cannot be dead! You have heard nothing more? No bad news?"

"No, my dear," he replied, drawing her to him, and kissing her. "It is only the long waiting, and the hope deferred, that troubles me. In fact the police think they have found a clew, but I put no faith in it. I have been deceived too often to trust them any longer."

"Oh, papa! and you have not spoken of it!" cried the girl reproachfully. "Do tell us. You know we have so little hope."

But ere he could answer her a loud peal at the bell startled them all. They had grown nervous with baffled hope and repeated dread, until every unusual sound seemed to have some reference to the subject of their grief.

The visitor proved to be the burly officer,

Tom Parsons, who was ushered into the parlor. Mr. Thorndike asking his wife and daughter to remain when he found who it was.

"I am glad to see you," he said, with a calm politeness which poorly concealed his repressed eagerness. "This is my wife and daughter, Mr. Parsons. If you have any news you may speak before them."

"But if it be bad news?" queried Tom.

"Bad or good," said Mrs. Thorndike, in a tone of nervous dread. "We have borne so much we can bear anything now."

"It is both bad and good," answered Tom, as he took the comfortable seat offered him, and laid his dusty hat on the elegantly bound books on the center-table. "I've a strong notion your son is still alive, Mrs. Thorndike."

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed the sad-faced mother with clasped hands.

"But whether we are likely to recover him or not is another question. Shall I tell you the whole story, as far as it has gone?"

"Yes, yes!" The three drew closer to him, their eyes fixed hopefully upon his face.

"Well then it comes to this," began Tom, fixing himself comfortably in his chair. "Mr. Thorndike knows part of the story, but I may as well begin at the beginning. One of ours, handsome Dave Darnly, or Dandy Dave, as the boys call him, struck a cew which he has been following like a hound after a deer. There is a girl in it, a dashed—Excuse me, I mean a very pretty girl. She took a fancy to Dave's handsome face. I don't know if it was just what folks call falling in love, but it had a blinking that way. You know how it is with the girls, Mrs. Thorndike?"

"Yes. Pray go on," answered the anxious lady, while a faint blush came to her daughter's cheeks.

"Anyhow, Dave cultivated her.—That's what we call it at the office," he added in an apologetic tone. "It wasn't long before he found that there was a big cat in the bag. In short, he pumped it out of her that she was some way mixed in with this gang of child-stealers. You can bet—I mean Mr. Thorndike can bet—of course I don't mean the ladies," blundered Tom, "that Dave cultivated her worse than ever after he struck oil in this fashion. He's kind of soft-hearted himself, and I've a notion he was a bit smitten, as well as the girl."

"Pray, hurry on, Mr. Parsons," said the gentleman impatiently. "We understand all that."

"I suppose so. It's only human nature," answered the imperturbable Tom. "Anyhow Dave pumped away at the girl, but she didn't pan out worth a cent. So we made a little plan to arrest her and try to scare the truth out. We were to arrest the pair of them, in fact, for between us, she didn't know the lay that Dave was on. She thinks he's a young gentleman of leisure. So we thought, by playing on her fancy for him, she might shell out the whole story to get him out of prison, even if she wouldn't blow a word to save herself."

"It wasn't a very creditable business for your friend, Mr. Darnly," said Mrs. Thorndike, with a curl of the lip.

"Do you know, Dave looked at it that same way," answered Tom. "We had the confoundedest trouble to get him into it. Looks to me like making a mighty fine point on the joke; but may be I'm no fair judge, being's I was never in love. Anyhow, last night was the time fixed for the fun. Dave wanted to give her another trial, and if that fell through he was to wave his handkerchief, and I was to step up and arrest them."

"So far I know the story," broke in Mr. Thorndike. "But what followed?"

"It come out according to programme. But there was another act in the play that wasn't on the bills. I had no sooner gone through the little farce of making the arrest, before up come a party of men, dropped me with a knock on the brain-pan that came nigh to cracking my skull, and snatched and made off with Dave and the girl both. Dave is handy with his fists, and he slathered them around promiscuously for a minute or two. So say some who were coming up to the rescue. But they were too strong for him, and they carried off the pair of them in the carriage which I had provided, consarn their impudent pictures."

"Is that all, Mr. Parsons?"

"That's all up to this present writing," answered Tom, "and I've a notion it's about enough for Dandy Dave. He's in an outrageous tight scrape, and not a soul of us knows where he is, or what step to take next."

"But what do you understand from all this?" asked Miss Thorndike, her young face aglow

with hope and excitement. "Do you really think that my little brother is yet alive?"

"I haven't no doubt of it, miss," rejoined Tom, confidently. "It stands to reason. This gang knew that Miss Ernestine—that's the girl's name—was posted in their doings. Whether they knew Dave's business I can't say, but they naturally grew suspicious when they saw him getting so thick with the young lady. To give it all in a nut-shell it's just this:—They've got the boy still in their clutches; they calculated that the girl had blowed on them; and they're going to make it hot work for the young man before he gets out of their hands. I wouldn't give a pint of peanuts for his life, that's the long and short of it."

"But my son still lives!" cried Mrs. Thorndike, with joyful hope. "My son still lives!"

"Perhaps he does, ma'am," answered Tom, rising with a scornful expression on his features. "If you're going to put a six-year-old kid in competition with a diamond of the first water like Dave Darnly, I've got nothing more to say. However, I suppose it's nature. You mustn't mind me, ma'am; but I value Handsome Dave more than a streetful of youngsters. That's about all. You'll please keep all this to yourselves. We will report progress if there's anything new turns up."

"You are not going already?" asked Mr. Thorndike.

"Yes. But I'd like to have a minute's private chat with you first, if the ladies don't think it's bad manners."

"Of course," answered the gentleman with a smile. "Come out front. We will take a stroll through the garden walk."

Tom clasped his dusty hat awkwardly under his arm, made a low bow to the ladies, which he intended to be very graceful, and followed Mr. Thorndike out.

The ladies looked significantly at each other after he had gone out.

"He is decidedly a rough diamond," said Mrs. Thorndike, with a smile.

"But a valuable one, mamma. He has brought us hope when we were on the verge of despair."

Meanwhile Mr. Thorndike and the officer had gained the garden that lay between the house and the street. They walked together up and down its green and bush-lined walks, inhaling the sweet fragrance which rose from its flowery expanse.

"It's not always best to tell everything before the women, you know," began Tom, with a significant look. "And particular when it concerns themselves."

"I fancy the whole affair concerns them," replied Mr. Thorndike.

"Yes. But not in this particular way. For instance, I don't want to be impudent, but isn't there a young fellow coming to see your daughter?"

"Suppose there is?" answered the gentleman, half angrily. "What has that to do with your business?"

"It might have a jugful," answered Tom, mysteriously. "I'm talking from the card. Mr. Thorndike, so you mustn't get on your ear for anything I say. It isn't that I've got anything against Will Masters, which I believe is his name. But I'm told that his folks don't just approve his coming to see Miss Kate."

"His father and I are not friends," replied Mr. Thorndike, coldly. "But as I have nothing against the boy I don't meddle with him. He is a fine young fellow, I believe."

"What's the trouble between you and his father?" asked Tom.

"That I decline to tell," was the cold and somewhat haughty answer.

"You think I'm pumping, now, I suppose," and Tom knowingly shrugged his shoulders. "But there's no use to be asking questions so long as I know the whole business. He don't like you because he loved your wife, and you stepped in and cut him out from her. He hates you for that, Allen Thorndike," continued Tom, impressively. "He hates you, and when Bentley Masters hates a man, that man is in danger."

"What do you mean?" cried Mr. Thorndike, turning upon him suddenly, and with a keen light in his eyes.

"I mean that he has never forgiven you for marrying Alice Linton. I mean that he is revengeful toward you. That is all I mean. I do not mean to say that he had a hand in stealing your son, for I do not know that he had. But I certainly suspect him. He has the stuff in him for it."

Mr. Thorndike stood in deep silence, slowly grinding the grass beneath his feet, while a strange look came upon his face.

Dashing Dave.

"I cannot believe this," he at length muttered. "He could not be so base."

"We detectives deal in theories," answered the officer. "But sometimes facts come out of theories. This is only a theory, so far. Keep deathly silent on it. If it turns out a fact it will be time enough to take off the embargo from your tongue. It's not exactly my idea. It's one of Dandy Dave's pets. But he don't often go wrong in his notions."

"Shall I interfere with the visits of the young man to my house?"

"No, on your life, no! Don't interfere with anything. We must not show our hand in any direction, till we are ready to strike, and then strike hard. That's our rule, Mr. Thorndike. Good-day, sir."

The gentleman stood long in musing contemplation after his visitor had left. He had gained new food for thought.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY.

We left Dave Darnly in a carriage with the men who had just captured him. We next find him in a prison-like room to which these men had consigned him. It was a narrow apartment, with but a single window, and this high up in the wall. This aperture was not grated, or otherwise secured, but he had already discovered from it that he was at the top of a high house, and some thirty or forty feet from the ground. There was nothing in the room which could be made to serve as a rope by which to descend from the window, so that escape by that avenue was cut off. As for the door it was of thick oak, and firmly locked. He was a close prisoner.

He grew more and more impatient as he walked restlessly from end to end of the room. His wrists had been relieved from the handcuffs, but in that room, bare of furniture except a single chair, his free hands were useless to him. Something of the look of the caged lion came into Dave's handsome face as he looked angrily around him.

"It's their deal in the game now, I suppose," he muttered. "But they'd best stock the cards well while they've got them in hand. They've got no fool to play with, I can promise them that. And if I'm not even with the whole gang before this business is ended, then you can call me an empty-brained fop in earnest."

He paused in his restless walk and listened. His quick ear had caught some sound through the closed door. A minute afterward he heard the rattle of a key, followed by the click of the lock. The door was pushed open by a strong hand.

The prisoner stood with one hand resting upon the back of his chair, his eyes keenly directed toward the door. Its opening revealed the form of a tall, thick set man, neatly dressed, but with his face hidden by a close mask, except the mouth and the firmly-rounded whiskered chin.

"I am glad to see you," said the prisoner sarcastically, "what there is of you to see. I'd offer you a chair, only that furniture is rather scarce hereaway. But the floor is handy if you care for a seat."

He seated himself in his single chair as he spoke, stretched out his shapely limbs, and regarded his visitor with as much easy assurance as if he had been receiving in his own drawing-rooms.

A harsh smile came upon the face of the newcomer, as he shut the door behind him.

"You take things confoundedly cool," he remarked, in a deep voice.

"Yes, I generally do," answered Dave, as he twirled the ends of his long mustache between his fingers. "But I can't say that I feel altogether at home here. The sleeping arrangements are none of the best. And how do you expect a man to get along without a looking-glass? I fancy my necktie is an inch out of plumb."

An oath came from the man's lips.

"Why, you empty-headed jackanapes of a dandy, is that all you've got to think of? You'll be asking us to provide you with a bootblack next."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," rejoined Dave, brushing a speck of dust with his handkerchief from his highly-polished shoes.

He leaned lightly back in his chair, and continued to twirl his mustache, as he looked with supercilious assurance into his visitor's face.

The latter gave a contemptuous shrug.

"It was worth while to trouble ourselves about this fool of a fop," he muttered. "The ch— has no more brains than a donkey."

"Thanks," returned Dave, carelessly. "It is

lucky I don't brag on brains, or I might not relish your neat comparison."

"I tell you what it is, my man," exclaimed the other, angrily. "That is not what I am here for. I believe you are more of a knave than a fool, but you were playing with fire when you tried to pump our secrets out of that light-headed girl. Did you fancy that our eyes were shut while you were trying your game with her?"

"What game?" asked Dave, innocently.

"That is what I am bound to find out. See here, my shrewd chap, do you know that we would as lieve kill you as we would a rabbit? Dead men tell no tales, and you've wormed yourself something too deep into our secrets. As for the girl—"

"Well, as for the girl?" asked Dave, with sudden interest.

"She has turned traitor to us. We have but one punishment for traitors. *Death!*"

"You will not dare!" cried Dave, starting up.

"There is nothing we will not dare," answered the man, coldly. "What can you do to hinder it?"

"This!" roared Dave. With a panther-like spring he darted across the room, and in an instant had his visitor by the throat.

"I can throttle you, you hell-hound!" he cried. "Swear that you will not touch a hair of her head, or by Heaven! I will not leave a flutter of life in your black carcass!"

The visitor, utterly taken by surprise, for a moment could do nothing to defend himself. He then attempted to draw a pistol, but Dave wrenched it from his hand.

He pressed him against the wall, and held the pistol to his head.

"Swear!" he cried, "or I will scatter your brains on the floor!"

A gurgling sound came from the man's lips. He was black in the face. But at this instant the door of the room was flung open and two men dashed in. It was but the work of a moment for them to seize the infuriated young man, and to wrest the pistol from his grasp. It was discharged in the struggle, but the ball buried itself harmlessly in the floor.

The next minute Dave was forced back into his chair, and held firmly. He breathed hard from his exertions, but there was no sign of flinching in the fierce glare of his eyes.

"It is our turn now," cried the released man, furiously, his face purple with congested blood. "Bind him fast. By the gods, but he shall smart for this!"

The young man made a moment's ineffectual resistance, but he was quickly tied to the chair, too firmly to give him a chance to move. His struggle lasted but for a minute, then he yielded to the superior force of his captors, while the old look of supercilious disdain returned to his face.

"Death, I repeat!" cried the man, with a harsh intonation. "Death to the traitress, and death to you, unless you swear, by the deepest oath, never to reveal the knowledge you have gained."

"If you knew as much as you profess," answered the prisoner, "you would know that Lucille has not betrayed you. If you kill her it will be for keeping faith with you. I have no knowledge of your schemes, for she told me nothing."

"You lie!" was the harsh reply.

The prisoner looked down on the cords which bound him.

"It is easy to insult a helpless man," he bitterly answered. "If my hands were free you would pay for that word."

"How then did you know of her connection with us? Why did you seek to gain information from her?"

"Not because she told anything," he answered, "but because I surmised something. As for your last question I am a friend of that poor family whose child you have stolen. If you had the soul of a man, and could see their distress, you would not need to be asked to return their child."

A look passed between the three men. Dave thought that he caught an expression of surprise in the glances that shot through the opening in their masks. What did this mean he asked himself? Was he mistaken in supposing that he was on the track of the child-stealers? Was it for some other crime that these men were banded together?

"I do not know what you mean," answered the man coldly. "We are not child stealers. As for Lucille if we find that she has not really betrayed us she may live; but we shall certainly take care to keep her away from your

pretty face, and your woman-killing ways. Are you prepared to take the oath not to reveal what you have learned, and to desist from any further interference with us?"

"No!" answered Dave, boldly. "I have learned nothing, so that is easily settled. But, as for binding myself for the future, I will make no hasty engagement."

"Very well, if you will have it so," was the cold response. "Those who play with edged tools must look to be hurt. You will not swear not to see us in the future if we meet you face to face; not to hear us if we shout in your ears, not to speak of us though we break a dozen laws in your presence?"

"Never!" answered Dave, resolutely.

"Then understand this: they who have no eyes cannot see. Those without ears cannot hear. He who has no tongue cannot speak. By all that's good, if you refuse the oath we give you, I will send you abroad the mere frame of a man, without eyes, ears or tongue! That is our way of disarming our enemies."

The captive shuddered with horror as he heard that harsh, cold voice and gazed upon the firm set of those lips. It was only an invincible opposition to binding himself as to his future actions that moved him. But could men be so devilish as this? There was something of manliness in the aspect of the speaker which looked as if he could not be so cruelly diabolical. The bound captive determined to brave them yet.

"What answer have you? Will you swear?"

"No!" answered Dave, half fiercely.

The three men conversed together for a minute.

"Bring the irons," the leader sternly said.

One of the others left the room.

It was a moment of terrible suspense to the prisoner. Would they really carry out their horrible threat? He would take a dozen oaths rather than that. But it was his disposition not to yield while a shadow of hope remained.

The messenger returned in a few minutes, carrying with him a box, in which sounded the clank of iron tools. The eyes of the prisoner followed their movements as if fascinated. The leader of the party bent over the box and took from it a long, sharp iron tool whose point he tried with his finger.

He rose and approached the helpless captive.

"Will you swear? This is your last chance for safety."

"No!" cried Dave, with a ring of indignation in his voice.

The leader made a sign to the others, who at once grasped and firmly held the head of the captive. The sharp, cruel point approached his eyes. He shut them with an impulse of terror. He was on the point of crying out that he would take the oath, when a sudden noise caused him to lift again his closed lids.

The noise had been that of hasty footsteps and of the violent flinging open of a door. His reopened eyes caught the form of Lucille Ernestine, who, with a look of horror and indignation upon her beautiful countenance, stood just within the door, gazing with distended eyes upon the critical tableau.

"Fiends!" she cried. "What would you do? Ah! ye shall not harm him! my love! my own!"

She flew across the floor as these cries broke from her lips, and with the strength of madness pushed away the men, and encircled his head with her sheltering arms.

"If he dies we will die together! If he is harmed we will be harmed together!" she exclaimed. "I have kept your secrets, and this is my reward. But you shall not harm him while I live!"

A pulse of warm joy shot through Dave's heart at the touch of that encircling arm, and of the warm cheek that lay against his. The avowal of her love, which had been wrung from her in the excitement of the moment, was like a touch of balm upon his soul. It aroused feelings which he did not know had dwelt there.

The three men stood back aghast for a moment at this interruption. Then a look of anger shot across the face of the leader, and he cried in a harsh voice:

"What brings that meddling girl here? Drag her away! Lock her up where she cannot interfere with our work! We will make this sweetheart of hers something that she will not be proud of."

The two men approached to obey this order. She lifted her head and looked around for a moment with the frightened eyes of a caged bird. Then, as if with a sudden impulse, she stooped, while the open blade of a knife gleamed in her hand.

Three or four quick strokes of the keen blade,

and the bonds fell from the limbs of the prisoner. Then turning like an enraged lioness she faced the men who threatened her, the knife glittering in her hand.

"A step more," she cried, "and one of you will feel the point of this blade! Quick! The road is open! One bold stroke for liberty!"

In an instant Dave obeyed. Springing from his chair he rushed upon the leader of the gang, and wrenched the iron from his hand. The three men avoiding the infuriated woman, rushed upon him. But backing himself against the wall, he brandished his dangerous weapon, and prepared to sell his life and liberty as dearly as possible.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO DECISIVE MOMENTS.

THE reader must accompany us for a short time to the residence of another character of our story, that of Bently Masters, of whom it will be remembered that Tom Parsons spoke to Mr. Thorndike.

This gentleman dwelt in a fine North Broad street mansion, about which was every evidence of wealth and elegant leisure. On the morning of the events described in our last chapter, he was seated in a room overlooking this broad avenue. He held a newspaper in his hand, but, just now, was giving little attention to its contents.

He was in form tall and rather slender, with an inclination to stoop. His face was one of those strange ones which it is not easy for a physiognomist to read. Small, keen gray eyes, a large and somewhat hooked nose, thin lips, and over all a look of decision and a sarcastic expression, made up the general features of the face; though there was in it a hidden something, not to be so easily solved.

Before him stood a young man of ingenuous countenance. His features were not unlike those of the older man, but they had a very different expression, while he was as good-looking as Mr. Masters was homely. He was evidently his son.

"You think I had an object in it, Will," said Mr. Masters, in a harsh tone. "Of course I had. I have an object in everything I do. But it happens now that my object has changed. You must cut loose from the girl."

A deep flush came into Will's young face.

"You should not have encouraged me to visit there, father," he quietly replied. "I am made of flesh and blood, like other people. Why do you wish to use me as if I was a machine, and with no more feeling than a thing made of wood and iron?"

"Nonsense, boy. None of that with me," replied the father, harshly. "What if you have taken a boy's fancy for the girl? You will take fifty fancies as strong before you are five years older."

"You do not know me," answered the young man, in firm tones. "I am not of that tickle nature. I love Kate Thorndike, and will never cease to love her."

There was deep sarcasm in Mr. Masters's laugh, as he leaned back in his chair and bent his keen eyes on Will's face.

"Never!" he cuttingly replied. "What a powerful word that is in a boy's mouth. Never means till you see the next pretty face, and hear the next sweet tongue. I am ashamed of you, Will. I thought you had more experience of the world."

"Never with me means never," rejoined Will, in modest but firm accents.

"Deuce take you for an obstinate young rascal!" cried his father, with sudden anger. "You have got to cut loose from the girl, and there's no use for us to bandy words about it. I did not know you were such a susceptible little donkey, or I would not have let you go there. But that's all over now. You must break it off."

"Why must I?" asked the youth, his cheek flushing.

"Because I say so. That's reason enough," was the stern response.

"I am your son; but not your slave," answered Will indignantly. "You have encouraged me to visit her until I have learned to love her with my whole soul. And now, for a mere whim, I must crush this love in my heart. I cannot, father."

"By the gods, you shall!"

"By the gods, I will not!"

With this indignant outburst the fiery youth, now full of his father's spirit, turned on his heel and would have left the room.

"Stop!" cried Mr. Masters, springing to his feet, and hurling the newspaper to the floor. "You defy my wishes, then?"

"In this, yes."

"Do you know why I demand it? It is that

Allen Thorndike is my bitterest foe. I hate him as I hate poison. I could slay him as I could slay a serpent. Shall a son of mine wed with a daughter of his? No, not if I must kill them both!"

His face was purple with passion as these words flowed in a torrent from his lips. Will looked at him with horror and surprise.

"This is your real feeling?" he asked.

"It is."

"And yet you encouraged my visits to this man's daughter?"

A slight sense of shame showed itself in the older man's face.

"I had an object in it," he said, in a lower tone.

"Your object, whatever it was, may be accomplished; but mine is not," replied Will, as he paused on the threshold. "I have learned to love Kate Thorndike. The work that is done cannot be undone at a breath."

"Come, come, Will," in a tone of conciliation. "What ails you, boy? I never knew you so ridiculously obstinate before."

"Because my whole life's happiness was never concerned before."

"You shall give her up!" cried the father, again flaming forth, "or you are no longer son of mine. Am I to be braved to my face by a beardless boy? If you refuse to obey me I disown you! You are no longer an inmate of my house! You are no son of mine!"

Will hesitated, resting his hand on the side of the door, while the color came and went in his ingenuous face. His whole frame shook with the deep throbbing of his heart.

"You are not yourself now," he said at length, in a voice of enforced calmness. "I will wait until this storm of passion blows over. I hope that then justice will return to your heart."

With a step that slightly reeled Will left the room, leaving his father still hot with rage in the center of the floor.

A harsh and bitter expression came into his face as he clutched his hands till the nails entered the flesh.

"So," he hissed, "the worm has turned against me! I didn't know there was so much of myself in that whit-elivered boy. But we shall see who is master here. He shall drop the girl, or I will turn him like a cur into the streets!"

Almost at the same moment that this event happened Dave Darnly had backed himself against the wall in his temporary prison and brandishing the sharp iron in his hand he defied the three men who were advancing upon him. The odds seemed fearful. Three to one, and each of them larger men than he. And to his single weapon they could oppose pistols and knives.

But nothing daunted he firmly awaited their onset, his eyes blazing defiance. He had, besides, an ally in Lucille, in whose hands still gleamed the knife with which she had released him.

"Come on!" he cried. "Villains and cowards! I do not fear you!"

The next minute they made a combined onslaught upon him. But he had the wall at his back, and he struck out with his dangerous weapon at the leader of the party, causing that individual to hastily retreat.

At the same instant the other two sprung upon him, one firmly grasping his left arm, while the other caught at his collar. It was a moment of danger, but Dave was equal to the occasion.

Quickly stooping he avoided the grasp of the second. Then, dropping his weapon he seized the long hair of this individual with his free hand, and gave him a sudden and vigorous swing around. His head came in contact with that of the other with a crack almost as loud as a pistol shot.

The next moment the athletic young man tripped up the feet of this unlucky individual, and flung him with stunning force to the floor. Then, wheeling round, he struck a fierce blow at the face of the man who held his arm, and who was dazed with the severe concussion which he had already received. Dave's fist took him square in the forehead, and he dropped like a shot.

In much less time than it takes to tell it he had disposed of two of his antagonists. But the third had drawn a pistol, and had a deadly aim upon him, his eyes glaring through the openings in his mask.

Unarmed and helpless before that deadly weapon, for the moment it seemed as if his efforts were to prove of no avail, and as if he must fall again into the hands of his foes.

But his ally now came to the rescue. Lucille

sprung forward, brandishing her knife, and made a quick stroke at the pistol hand of the villain.

With a deep oath he started back, dropping the weapon to the floor.

"Fly! Fly!" cried Lucille, as she set her little foot on the weapon, and threatened her shrinking foe with the knife. "The path is free. Fly while you have the opportunity."

Dave sprung forward. One of the prostrate men was endeavoring to rise, but he hurled him back to the floor with a fierce thrust of his foot. The next instant he had possessed himself of the pistol.

"I will not fly without you," he cried, taking her hand and drawing her swiftly toward the door.

It had all passed so quickly that they were out of the room before an effort could be made to hinder them.

Then the infuriated leader of the villains rushed to one of the prostrate men, who was again endeavoring to rise, and snatched a revolver from his belt. Armed with this weapon he sprang to the door, and sent a bullet whizzing after the fugitives who had already reached the head of a flight of stairs.

The crack of the weapon was answered by a loud scream from Lucille.

"Great Heaven, I am shot!" she cried, as she tottered and fell.

With mad fury Dave turned and fired wildly into the room into which his assailant had retreated after his fatal shot. Then picking up the prostrate form of the moaning girl in his arms, he dashed rapidly down the stairs, his burden feeling to him of a feather's weight in his excitement.

He was quickly pursued. Another bullet followed him as he reached the bottom of the stairs. But heedless of all but the dear burden in his arms, Dave dashed onward, along passages and down flight after flight, while the heavy tread of pursuit sounded ever behind him.

Reaching the first floor a quick glance showed him that the door leading outward was closed, perhaps locked. But the door to a side room stood open, and through that he could perceive an open window, with the sash thrust up to its fullest height.

Another shot from the stairs followed him as he ran through this door. With a fierce impulse he turned and fired back. He had no thought of aiming, the pistol was directed by mere chance up the stairs, yet its report was followed by a loud cry and the crash of a heavy body on the stairs. Dave's shot had brought down its game.

The next moment he was at the window. It was impossible to leap through with the burden he held, and he had not an instant in which to decide. Laying the wounded or dead girl on the sill, he sprung through with an alert leap, just as one of his pursuers appeared in the doorway.

A third bullet followed him as ineffectually as the others. He seemed to bear a charmed life.

But in one respect he had miscalculated. The window was full seven feet from the ground. He crushed down through a growth of bushes and struck the earth at a point quite out of reach of the body of Lucille, whom he had intended to take with him in his flight.

It was too late. He would have to leave her in the hands of his foes. An alert leap and he gained the corner of the house. Looking back he caught a glimpse of his principal foe at the window.

"Murderer!" cried the young man, passionately. "You have killed her! But you will not find me so easy to kill! She shall not die without being revenged!"

He hurried on, his heart full of passionate despair. He knew that he was not yet safe from danger, and he ran at his utmost speed across the open space that appeared before him.

It was the yard surrounding an old-fashioned mansion. On its other side were some out-buildings, whose shelter he was seeking.

In a few minutes more he was running at full speed across an open field, beyond which some houses were visible. His pursuers appeared around the stable which he had just left behind him. They seemed hesitating whether or not to pursue, for the young athlete was dashing onward at a speed that no ordinary runner could hope to overtake.

CHAPTER V.

AN ASSAULT IN FORCE.

DAVE DARNLY'S neck-tie was awry and his hair tumbled in a way that was unprecedented.

in one of his exquisite habits. Yet for once he was oblivious to this fact. There was too much in his mind for even a looking-glass to have any charms for him. In an hour from the time in which he had made his hasty flight from his temporary prison he was on his way back, armed with authority, and with three or four resolute men to back him.

There was the strongest reason for his anxiety. On the front of the light-colored vest he wore was a dark red stain, on which his eyes gazed with horror. It was her blood—the blood of Lucille! He had pressed her to his heart, and this was her life-blood, which had flowed from that perhaps fatal wound.

The horror in his mind was mingled with anger, and a passionate thirst for revenge, as his eyes became riveted upon this dread sign. He swore in his soul that if she had been murdered her death should be amply atoned for. He would pursue her murderers though his life should be given to the task.

It was scarcely two hours from the time of his hasty flight when he again reached the vicinity of the house from which he had fled. It was situated in the sparsely settled region to the north of the city, and stood almost alone, the nearest houses being a quarter of a mile distant.

When Dave and his party approached they were surprised at its utter quietness and look of desolation. Windows and doors were closed, and there was no sign of life about the whole establishment.

"Are they in ambush?" asked one of the party, peering curiously at the house. "May be they are going to give us a hot welcome."

"I hope so," answered Dave gloomily. "But I fear not. I imagine they are gone."

They cautiously approached the closed door. There seemed an unnatural quiet about the establishment. One or two of the men drew nervously back, half fearing a volley of bullets from those closed windows.

But Dave advanced boldly to the door, and tried the latch. It opened easily to his hand. All within was silent and deserted. No sign of life appeared.

"By all that's good, they have given us the slip!" cried the young leader, dashing furiously forward. "Follow me, lads. They may be in hiding somewhere about the house. Search the whole establishment from garret to cellar. It will be a sorry day for the man of them I find."

"It may be a sorrier day for you when you find him," came in a harsh voice from the head of the stairs.

Every eye was turned upward, and beheld a dark figure half concealed in the gloom that lurked in the closed passage. But the next instant they crouched and shrank as a bright flash was followed by the thud of a pistol bullet which buried itself in the thick door.

Two more ineffectual shots followed, the men crouching to the floor to escape them. Then, with a fierce oath, the man flung his emptied pistol down among them. One of the assailing party had, unluckily for him, just lifted his head to gaze at the dark figure who was making a target of them. The hurled weapon took him in the forehead immediately between the eyes, and tumbled him over like a dead log to the floor.

But Dave Darnly had not shown the crouching cowardice of his companions. Headless of the flying bullets he dashed for the stairs, his eyes keenly fixed on the dark form of his foe.

It was at him that the pistol had been flung, but a quick movement avoided the flying missile, which shot onward to meet the unfortunate fellow below.

A harsh oath of disappointment broke from the man's lips. He turned and dashed back into the house, followed rapidly by his infuriated pursuer.

"Follow me, men!" cried Dave, as he dashed onward. "They are here! We will have them yet."

From the head of the stairs a wide passage led backward. It opened into rooms on each side, into one of which the flying man had vanished ere the pursuer could reach the head of the stairs.

Dave ran quickly forward. He tried the door of one of these rooms. It opened to his touch and revealed an empty apartment. He had less success with the other door. It was locked, and failed to yield to his utmost effort.

"A hammer! an ax! Bring something!" he yelled. "He is in here! We will have him out if we tear down the house to reach him."

"Let me at the door!" exclaimed one of the others, who had just run up. "I will show you how to open locks."

He was a brawny, big-fisted man, with a leg and foot of elephantine proportions. Pushing Dave aside with little ceremony, he braced himself against the opposite side of the passage, lifted his ponderous foot, and dashed it with a ringing thud against the closed door.

No light strength could stand that powerful shock. There was a sound of rending wood and cracking iron. The door flew open as if it had been struck by a pile-driver.

With the leap of a panther Dave sprung through the opening, his eyes blazing, his frame nerved to an expected struggle. But to his utter surprise he found the room empty. The game which he had fancied caged was flown.

"The window! The window!" cried his burly aid. "It is raised! He must have gone by that way!"

A glance revealed the truth of this idea. The window, which was of no great height from the ground, overlooked a lawn-like portion of the grounds, on the opposite side of the house to that by which the pursuers had approached. Beyond the low fence which bounded it ran a country road. At the moment in which they reached the window they caught sight of the fugitive, mounted on a strong black horse, and just topping this low fence into the road.

A shout of derision came from him as his horse struck the road. He waved his hand in the air.

"Follow me, who can!" he shouted.

The next moment the powerful horse was thundering rapidly down the road, carrying the fugitive away from his baffled pursuers.

Dave followed him with a look of blank disappointment. Then he turned quickly to his followers.

"He has left us in the lurch," he exclaimed, "but there were others. Search the house. Some of them may be here. They could not have taken Lucille away."

Inspired by this thought he himself dashed through the house, searching room after room with feverish haste. The others seconded him in this endeavor, but all in vain, there was not a living soul in the house.

Even the furniture was removed, if there had been any there, for the rooms were bare and empty.

But there was one thing found that was distressingly significant to the young lover. This was a red patch of blood on the floor, scarcely dry as yet, and near by it the encrusted fragment of a bandage, as if an effort had been made to bind up the wound.

He laid his right hand on the crimson spot as on a shrine.

"By the great Gods!" he swore, "if she has been murdered she shall be fully revenged! If the earth holds her murderers I will find them, and avenge this bloody deed!"

There was evidently nothing more to be done there. On leaving the house they were met by an old man, who gazed curiously at them.

"Do you know who lived in this house?" asked Dave.

"There hasn't a blessed soul lived in it for the last three months," was the answer. "It belongs to the Lemoine estate, and has been empty ever since the old man died."

"You are mistaken," cried Dave arbitrarily. "There were people in it yesterday and to-day, as I happen to know."

"That's the queer thing," the old fellow replied. "I saw them drive away from here in a carriage, an hour ago. Afterward a man came back on horseback, and went into the house. I suppose he must have forgot something, for he's just away again."

"What sort of a looking man was he?"

"I'm not much on faces, and I did not take any particular notice of this one," was the cautious answer. "He was a tall, stoutish chap, with a black beard and a kind of captainish look about him. One of the kind that lays down the law for everybody else to follow."

Satisfied that they could get no further information from this source, the searching party proceeded along the road which the horseman had taken, closely questioning as they proceeded. The road led toward the city, and though the fugitives were easily traced through the rural districts, they were lost when they entered the region of built-up streets. It was quite impossible to tell what route they had taken through this labyrinth of avenues, and the chase was soon given up in despair.

Information given the police proved equally ineffective. The whole force was set on the look-out by telegraphic warning, but nothing came from it. The fugitives had covered up their tracks.

There was but one other suggestion that

came to the despairing lover. If Lucille was not dead then it was possible that some doctor or surgeon would be called in to her aid. If dead some information might be obtained from the undertakers. It was a mode of inquiry that was, at least, worth making.

He sat in his room, as these thoughts came to him, his eyes gloomily fixed upon the opposite wall, and thoughtlessly turning in his pocket the mysterious ring which she had given him, with such strange hints as to its character.

It was no Aladdin's ring. No powerful genius arose as he rubbed it between his fingers. Not even a thought came to him of what he should do in his emergency.

He drew the ring from his pocket, forgetful of what it was or whence he had received it. A slight start affected him as his eyes fell upon it. There came back the recollection of her words on banding it to him, and of her insistence that he should keep it. He looked at it with awakened curiosity.

It was a slender golden circlet, with a narrow but rather thick plate, on which was engraved a strange device. This was the minute figure of an animal of the form of a lizard, though its head had a snake-like aspect. It seemed as if intended for a seal, for there was a slight fragment of wax yet in one of its fine lines.

Dave sat looking curiously at it, as if he would extract some meaning from this peculiar figure. Finally, taking his hat, he left the room, carrying the mysterious ring with him. Not many minutes afterward he entered the store of a jeweler friend of his in the vicinity.

"Here is a ring that I came by in a strange fashion," he announced. "I wish you would examine it. It strikes me as a very curious thing, and I have reason to understand that there is some mystery connected with it."

The jeweler examined it closely.

"A very strange device," he remarked. "Somebody's whim, I suppose. There is nothing in the ring, though, except—"

He became silent, as he turned the ring on its side, and examined the plate more particularly.

"Rather thicker than there is any occasion for," he muttered. "It looks solid, but I should not wonder if there was a hollow place in the thickness of that plate."

He put his glass to his eye and intently looked at the edge of the plate. Dave's eyes were fixed upon him with impatient interest. He seemed unnecessarily deliberate.

"A very fine piece of work," he continued, "but there is a joint. Wait a moment. There must be a spring somewhere about it."

Taking up a fine instrument, he touched the ring at every promising point.

"I must have been mistaken," he said, shaking his head. "That crack may have been a mere scratch. Unless this—"

He had inserted the point of the instrument in a slight depression as he spoke. There was a faint click, and the top of the plate flew up like a hinged cover. A small opening appeared beneath.

"Good for our side!" cried Dave, eagerly. "It is hollow! And there is something in the opening!"

"Just so," answered the jeweler, inserting the fine point of his instrument into the concealed cavity, and lifting from it what seemed a minute piece of folded paper.

Carefully unfolding this by the aid of his fine tools, it proved to be a piece of excessively thin paper, about an inch square in its spread-out condition.

"It does not seem much of a prize after all," remarked Dave, with some disappointment of tone.

"Wait a moment," replied the jeweler, as he examined it with his glass.

"There is writing upon it," he remarked. "Or perhaps it may be a photographed inscription. I can barely make it out with my glass. It is not powerful enough to read it with. You will have to examine it under a more powerful microscope, Mr. Darnly."

"Thank you," replied Dave. "I shall certainly do that. I have a notion that it may prove a very interesting document, though I have not the most remote idea what it is."

Replacing it within the ring for safe keeping, Dave left the store, anxious to proceed with his investigation.

CHAPTER VI.

PICKING UP THREADS.

"A HIGH old bit of fun up the street last night," exclaimed Tom Parsons, a little excitedly, as he entered the room where sat Lieutenant Hill, of the Reserve Police.

The latter looked up in some surprise. Tom was not easily excited.

"What has broken loose?" he asked.

"A neat job of crib-cracking, that's all," answered Tom, flinging his hat on the table. "The owls have struck oil. Knight & Rogers's jewelry establishment has been busted and cleaned out to a mighty neat tune. Diamonds, gold watches, rings—Oh! it's a sweet bit of light-fingered art."

Lieutenant Hill dropped the pen with which he had been writing, and leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Tom.

"Just found out?" he asked.

"Yes. Those are highly respectable folks, you know, and don't open out early. When you got in this morning, they found that some of their dear friends had opened up for them. The back door was on the slip, and the safe neatly cracked. A Sunday's job, I fancy. It's an awkward Monday morning's surprise, anyhow."

"Any estimate of the amount of loss?"

"All guess, so far. Some thirty to fifty thousand is the street talk; but you must always take street talk with a pinch of salt. It's just as likely to be three thousand."

"Were you in the store?"

"Me? Not much. That isn't my notion of business. This is our head-quarters. Tain't hard to find us. I'm no volunteer detective."

The lieutenant laughed at Tom's idea of professional dignity, and still more at the tone in which this was said.

"I suppose you are ready to go when called for," he said, as a clicking sound came from a corner of the room. "And there's a call for some of us now."

He rose and went to the telegraphic instrument that was rattling busily away.

"I thought so," he at length announced. "There's a detective wanted at Knight & Rogers's. You'd best step up, Tom. They need somebody that's posted in the tricks of the trade, and you're just the man."

"I'd give an even dollar if Dandy Dave was here," replied Tom, as he took his hat. "He's the keenest man in the service on a scent of this kind. I believe that chap can see further through a milestone than the best ten of his fellow-sinners."

"Where is he, Tom? He got safe away from those fellows that captured him?"

"You bet he did. I told you they'd find they were fooling with a hornet's nest when they nabbed Dave. I don't know what in the sun ho is after, since. He's got some foolery afoot."

Tom left the room with a look of superior wisdom on his face. The lieutenant resumed his writing, with the remark:

"If you only had a little of Dave's foolery your stock of brains would be a good deal increased."

What was this foolery of Dandy Dave's. We must go and find out. Since the time we last saw him he had been busily engaged, but to no useful end. There was no evidence that either doctor, surgeon, or undertaker had been called in to the aid of Lucille Ernestine. If any outside aid had been rendered, it had been secretly done, and had left no discoverable indications.

During this search he had paid no attention to the mystery of the ring, but now a strong desire arose in his mind to trace its hidden secret. Who could tell what important revelation was traced on that mysterious scrap of paper?

Dave, taking the advice of his friend, the jeweler, sought a microscopist, and submitted the strange document to his inspection.

He stood by in curious interest while the latter adjusted his instrument, spread the thin scrap on its object table, put in a lens of moderate power, and applied his eye to the eye-piece.

All this was done with professional deliberation, and Dave waited with growing impatience on the slow movements of the scientist.

"Well," he asked, in a quick tone. "Is there anything in it? Or is it only a sell?"

"Decidedly like a sell, I fancy," returned the other. "It's a sort of diagram, dotted up in a curious fashion. Take a look at it for yourself."

Dave applied his eye to the instrument, and saw a network of lines, some straight, others bent or curved. At the intersections of some of these lines were minute colored dots, some being black, some red, and others white. Beside each of these dots was a word, but from these no information could be gained, as they were entirely disconnected.

At the top of the paper the dots reappeared, in the three colors, and opposite each color was a drawing of clasped hands, each color being paired with a separate mode of hand clasping.

"I've a notion there's something in it," said Dave, rubbing his chin reflectively. "But just what it is I can't get through my cranium yet. All these lines and dots, these words and clasped hands, mean something very interesting if a fellow could only get at the bottom of it. But I am too thick-headed to see through it yet."

"Let me try the instrument again," remarked the scientist. "Only a part of the paper has been in the field of view yet. By looking over the whole surface something else of interest may be found."

Moving the field to and fro he gradually brought every portion of the paper under his eye.

"Ha!" he at length exclaimed. "I fancied so. Here is something written. Wait a minute till I get a look at it all."

He shifted the field again backward and forward.

"Pshaw!" he cried. "It's as great a mystery as the diagram. What in the world does it all mean? I take it to be pure nonsense."

"Read it. Perhaps it may have some meaning to me."

The professor read as follows:

"The seal of the grand chief of the Lizards. Let it be obeyed, on peril of death."

"That is the ridiculous farrago," he remarked. "It sounds like some sort of child's play."

"No," answered Dave thoughtfully, "there's more in it than you imagine, though I don't see my way through it yet."

He dropped into a moment's reverie, while the professor continued to examine the mysterious document.

"That is all," he announced. "I see nothing more on it."

"Could you make me a magnified copy of it?" asked Dave.

"Ob yes! Without difficulty."

"Then I will leave it in your hands. I want an opportunity to study it thoroughly. There is far more in that than appears on the surface, and more than one life may rest on my success in unfolding the riddle."

He left the room, the strange document remaining in the keeping of the scientist.

An hour afterward, at the request of Lieutenant Hill, whom he had met, Dave entered the jewelry store of Knight and Rogers. The person in charge, a stout gentleman, with a very disturbed countenance, looked up with an inquiring glance at his visitor, who was dressed as usual, in the tip of the mode.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, as Dave stood by the counter, indolently twirling his well waxed mustache.

"Nothing particular, just now," replied our friend, while his eyes took a keen survey of the store. "Let me see—it was at that door they entered?"

"Who entered?"

"Your professional visitors; the burglars."

"Oh! in a tone of weariness. "Excuse me, but I've been talked to death on that subject this morning. You will find the whole story in the afternoon papers."

"Oh! thanks," replied Dave, still playing with his mustache, and darting his keen glances around. "In the afternoon papers, you say. I shall be happy to read it. A little hard on you, sir, but it's matter of public interest. Is that the safe your professional friends interviewed?"

"Yes." The proprietor turned on his heel, with a gesture of impatience.

"I should like to examine it."

"Perhaps you would," angrily. "But it does not contain any new style neckties, so I hardly think you will find anything there to interest you."

A laugh of amusement came from Dave's lips.

"Excuse me," he remarked. "Perhaps I might find something there of interest. Here is my card."

He handed the proprietor a daintily scented and neatly engraved card, which he took from an ivory card-case. The latter glanced his eyes testily over it, and then looked up with a start of surprise. Dave was idly switching his slender, gold-headed cane.

"Is there not some mistake here?"

"Not much, I fancy."

"You, a detective officer?"

"It is an honorable business."

"Yes, but—" and he looked at the apparently foppish young gentleman before him.

"All is not gold that glitters," answered Dave laughingly. "I have my fancies about dress and all that sort of thing. But—you have heard of the hand of steel under the glove of silk. Can I see that safe, sir?"

The astonished proprietor looked again at his

enigmatical visitor. He caught the steely glint in the young man's eyes, and at once changed his opinion.

"Certainly," he answered, with a quick change of tone. "There was an officer here an hour ago, but I should like to have your decision upon the matter."

"Yes," replied Dave. "Mr. Parsons. I doubt if I can better him much, but I will at least take a look. These chaps may have left their signatures."

"Their signatures?"

"Precisely: Pen and ink marks are not the only or the best way of writing a person's name. I have known it to be written with a chisel on an iron lock more surely than the best pen could do it. A person's handwriting may be counterfeited, but his handiwork is a harder thing to imitate. This is the safe, then? Ah! they were expert workmen who went through that bit of iron. Loss heavy, sir?" asked Dave, as he carefully spread his handkerchief, and sunk on one knee to examine the safe door more closely.

"Rather," answered the proprietor, with a shrug. "Twenty thousand would not replace it. And it may be double that amount. We have not gone over our books yet."

Dave made no answer. He was minutely examining the door, which seemed to have been cut with steel chisels and forced open with powerful wrenches. There was not a chisel mark on the hard iron that escaped his keen vision.

"A good job," he said, rising. "Those are no amateurs. And they entered by this door?"

"We found it open this morning. But there are no marks of violence on it."

"Very true," answered Dave, after a minute's inspection. "False keys did the work there. That is all? They left nothing behind them?"

"Nothing."

"What is this?" He picked up a scrap of steel from the floor.

"Of very little account, I should say."

"Perhaps so," answered Dave. "It is only a bit of the edge of a broken chisel. A mere trifle, of course. And yet, as I said before, a man may write his signature with a chisel as well as with a pen."

"You don't see anything in that?"

"It is the best bit of evidence I have found yet," answered Dave. "I won't say that I can put my hands on the burglars; but I can safely say this much: they are the same gang that tried the Farmers' Bank two weeks ago, and that lifted a heavy plunder in New York last January."

"How do you make that out? Mr. Parsons found nothing of that sort."

"Two pairs of eyes are better than one," answered Dave, with a shrug. "These fellows might have left a bag full of tools and I not found as much in it as in this sliver of steel. It is the ground edge of a chisel, you perceive. Now there is an art in everything, even in the grinding of a chisel. If you examine it with your glass you will see that the lines of the grinding run in a peculiar slant."

"Yes, I perceive."

"There were some tools left in the two other jobs I spoke of. The grinding was done in the same way. A detective can let nothing escape him, you see. I cannot say that we are on their trail, but we have here something that may lead to something more. Good-day, sir."

"Good-day," and the proprietor followed Dave's graceful form with astonished eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

A SON DISOWNED.

"I LOVED Alice Linton, boy. I fancied that she loved me. But men are fools and women are false, you know.—Sit still, you must hear me through," and Bently Masters arbitrarily waved his son back into the chair from which he had risen.

"She taught me a lesson in love," he bitterly continued. "Allen Thorndike came along, with a smoother face, a softer tongue, and a longer purse than I could boast. It was the latter, I fancy, that turned the tables. At all events I was incontinently pitched overboard, and her heart—her heart, mind you, boy—turned to this new-comer. I will not go through the whole story. It was treachery throughout. I came to hate her as much as I had ever loved her."

Will sat silent, listening to this revelation of his father's early life, but without a sign of sympathy on his young face. The breach between them was not yet healed.

"I hated her, I say," repeated his father, with harsh emphasis. "And I hated and despised him, the man who robbed me of her. I swore

to be revenged on them both. I am a Masters, boy. I am of a race that was never yet trodden on without turning. I wish you had more of that spirit."

"Thank Heaven that I have not," replied Will fervently. "I am sorry you have told me this story. And I cannot see what it has to do with the subject of our dispute."

"It has this to do," was the stern reply. "If I could not reach her through herself, I could reach her through her children. I like to repay in kind. I loved her and she jilted me. Her daughter loves you. You shall jilt her. I have let you go on until the girl's heart was utterly wrapped up in you. It will be like snapping a life-string for you to break loose. That is what I want. I want to snap their life-strings."

There was a bitter malignity in his tone that made Will shudder. The glitter in his father's eyes seemed almost that of the maniac.

"You have done more," replied Will respectfully but firmly. "Your sword has cut with both edges. She has not only learned to love me, but I have learned to love her. I cannot give her up."

"Love!" a sneering laugh accompanied this word. "Why, you unpruned sapling, you don't know the meaning of the word yet. You will love a dozen as strongly before you are five years older. Come, Will, don't be acting the fool with me. You must break with this girl."

"I hoped, after our dispute the other day, that you would not raise this question again," answered the young man decisively, drawing up his form to its full height. "I cannot and will not give her up, father, even at your command."

"Then, by the God above me, you are no longer son of mine!"

The son's face grew deathly pale as he turned toward the door of the room. He staggered, and grasped the door frame for support. Yet his lips were firmly set, his eyes full of a resolute spirit.

He looked around as he leaned against the supporting frame. His father's eyes were fixed upon him with a gaze of impotent fury.

"This is the second time that I have heard those words," came in low but clear tones from the youth. "You shall not need to repeat them again. You have just regretted that I have not the spirit of a Masters. I have at least the spirit not to want to be kicked from my father's house."

He turned to go again. Mr. Masters grew white about the lips.

"Stop, you idiot!" he screamed. "Come back here!"

Will paused and looked back.

"When I feel that I can respect you again I will return," he remarked. "I fear that you have not told me all. In your hatred against the wife of Allen Thorndike have you contented yourself with breaking her daughter's heart?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who was it that stole away her son?"

The low quiet voice was intense in its earnestness. The eyes of the youth were fixed upon his father like those of an accusing fate. A shudder ran through Bently Masters's frame. Then he burst out again in a paroxysm of rage.

"Impudent varlet!" he hissed, clutching the chair beside him as if he would use it as a weapon. "Do you dare to impute that to me?"

"I make no accusation," answered Will calmly. "But I cannot cease to love Kate Thorndike, and I shall use every effort in my power to aid in the recovery of her stolen brother, no matter who is guilty of the crime."

The sound of his departing footsteps were audible along the gallery. Then there came the noise of a shutting door, and all was still. For full five minutes the father stood in the attitude in which Will had last seen him, his clutch on the chair, his eyes fixed on the spot from which his son had disappeared. Then with a sound that seemed made up of a sigh and a curse he fell back into the easy-chair behind him, and rested his bowed head upon his hand. Was it remorse or revenge that moved him now?

Two hours afterward, on a grassy knoll in the beech grove back of Mr. Thorndike's residence, Will Masters was seated beside Kate Thorndike, her hand in his and her eyes fixed with a startled look upon his face.

"Going West!" she exclaimed, in a tone of pained surprise.

"Yes," he replied. "There are reasons which it is best not to mention now. I must leave this city for awhile. But not for long, I hope."

His eyes were fixed with a look of deep affection upon hers.

"Reasons!" she cried, pressing his hand in

hers. "What reasons can there be? Are there not reasons why you should not go West?"

"Yes, indeed," he answered, kissing the warm lips that were turned to him in such loving solicitude. It rends my heart to part from you, dearest. It seems barbarous that those who love should be torn apart by bitter circumstances. But there have things happened, Kate, that make it necessary for me to take some decided step."

"Things? What things?"

"I cannot tell you that."

There was something in his tone that struck her ear painfully. She fixed her eyes eagerly upon his expressive face.

"Ah! I know," she cried. "You cannot conceal it from me. It is a renewal of that quarrel with your father. Forgive me for speaking of it, dear Will; but I have a right to know all that concerns you. You would go West because—"

"Because I have no longer a home or a father!" he broke out, with sudden energy.

"Ah! I feared as much!"

"I must live, Kate. I am penniless. I am utterly unfit to make my living in this great city. But I am young, strong and enterprising. I will go where these qualities tell."

"And leave me?" her voice had in it an agonized entreaty.

"Only for a time, love."

"You shall not go!" she cried, clasping him with her arm, as if she could thus prevent him. "My father is wealthy. I have money of my own. You shall not go. Do you suppose we will let you suffer?"

Will, with a resolute movement, put aside her arm and rose to his feet, his eyes fixed upon her with a strange look.

"Do not repeat that, Kate," he said, quietly. "I thought you knew me better. I must go West."

"Why should I not repeat it?" she cried, with reckless energy. "I love you! I am part of yourself! You are too proud to owe anything to me, then? Why do you not say at once that you despise me and my offer?"

"I do not want to despise myself," he quietly replied.

"But, Will. But—" she rose to her feet, her hands clasped in an agony of trouble. She could not find words to express herself.

"I understand you, dear," he rejoined, clasping her slender waist and pressing his lips to hers. "But how would it sound for the world to say that Will Masters had been disowned by his father, and had settled down upon the bounty of his betrothed?"

"I do not care for the world!" she hotly replied.

"But I do. And for my own self-respect. There, there, Kate. It will not do. Say no more about it. Something may turn up, who knows? I may not have to leave you. And if I do, it will only be my body, not my heart. There will be a link between us that will surely draw me back again. The whole world could not keep us long apart."

Clasping her hand in his, they walked on through the grove, their tones falling as their voices fell upon softer themes.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS DIAGRAM.

The detective service was vigorously at work in search of the gang of burglars who had made the big haul at Knight & Rogers's. Yet it was not likely to prove an easy task to discover these birds of the darkness. The same gang, as Dave Darnly affirmed, had made two or three successful hauls within the previous year, yet no trace of them had been discovered. Their track was too well hidden to be easily revealed.

Of course the usual programme was gone through. The principal thieves' head-quarters in the city were put under surveillance; the "fences," were visited or shadowed; a list of all the traceable stolen articles was distributed to the police authorities of the various cities; and an effort was made to reach the burglars by that more modern method, of putting out feelers for a return of the stolen property, "for a consideration."

So much done, the authorities had nothing further to do than to lay on their oars and await developments. The thieves were as silent as the grave. They had been swallowed up by the great city, and sunk out of sight as utterly as though they had never lived. The service was, so far, quite set astray. But there is a virtue in watching and waiting which no one knows better than the members of the detective service. They went to sleep with their eyes open in the style of the true scout.

And so the days passed on, neither party showing its hand, yet both keenly alive to every indication.

Meanwhile Dave received from the microscopic professor the promised tracing of the ring diagram. He had greatly expanded it in size, so that it now occupied a large sheet, and its features were plainly evident. Yet it continued as great an enigma as before. He could make nothing of that network of black lines, with their occasional colored dots.

The lines crossed each other usually at right angles, though in some cases they were oblique to each other. And the dots seemed to occur in no special order, being occasionally found at the intersection of lines, and in other cases occupying intermediate positions.

He gazed at it in a complete puzzle. The words adjoining the dots, the clasped hands, what could it all mean? A vague idea was working into his brain, but it took no definite shape as yet. He continued to study it in a deep quandary.

"By Jupiter! they needn't have been afraid of anybody smelling out their secret," he exclaimed. "There was no need of reducing it to microscopic size, and hiding it in the secret chamber of a ring. I don't want Lucille's word to show me that there is something in it. But what is it? That's the question. I will have to show it to Harry Hill. Maybe his sharp eyes may make more out of it than I can."

It was not many minutes afterward ere he had the mysterious diagram spread before the eyes of Lieutenant Hill, and of his friend Tom Parsons, who happened to be present.

"I wish you'd tell me what it means," said Dave, folding his arms and sinking resignedly into a chair. "I have puzzled over the confounded thing till I am doubtful if I have any brains left."

The two officers looked at it with surprise and interest.

"Oh! it's some confounded sell," cried Tom, half angrily, after a minute's inspection. "Come, Dave, that's played out. You can't get that off us."

"Nary sell," answered Dave. "It's a solid document. A little like one of those riddles we used to make on our slates at school; easy to get in, but mighty hard to get out. What do you make of it, Harry?"

The lieutenant, who had continued to closely observe the strange diagram, now looked up and asked Dave whence he had procured it.

This involved an explanation of the story of the ring, in which only the mode in which it was obtained was concealed. He preferred not to bring Lucille's name into the matter.

"You have it there, in short meter," he concluded. "Tell me what it means, and I have a notion I can promise you two things. The first is the recovery of Knight & Rogers's stolen goods. The second is the finding of Clarence Thorndike, the lost child. I may be mistaken, but I have a shrewd notion that all our fish may be caught in that net. The thing is, how is the net to be taken up?"

"May be there are some big fish in it," answered Tom, as he rubbed the bald spot on his head, "but hang me if I can see them! I never guessed a riddle in my life. What do you make, now, of this stuff at the bottom, about the 'seal of the grand chief of the Lizards?' It's all Greek to me."

"This," answered Dave, showing the lizard engraved upon the ring. "This is to be obeyed, on peril of death. Wouldn't I give something neat if I only knew how to use it and whom to use it on?"

Lieutenant Hill examined it closely. He then laid it down and returned to the diagram, which seemed to have a peculiar fascination for him.

"Very good, my boy," remarked Tom. "But what is there in these scattered words? I bet you can't put them together. What do you make out of 'Moonstone,' 'sachem,' 'duplex,' and this one, 'skim milk?' It all looks like skim milk to me. And the clasped hands at the top. Is that some secret society grip?"

"Hallo!" cried Dave, springing to his feet with such animation as to send his chair rolling over upon the floor. "I'll bet a big apple the boy has blundered into it! For a pint of beer that's just what it means! And the words are pass-words. Stupid ninny I was not to see that at sight! That lets a flood of light upon the whole business. Give me your hand, Tom."

He took Tom's fat hand between his slender and sinewy fingers, and practiced on him successively the three grips, as designed upon the diagram.

"Here it is, my lad. Slip your thumb around this way. You're an awkward hand at a grip,

Tom. I thought you were a full-fledged Mason. Here, this is it. Now the others."

After a little practice he was able to make the three grips with ease.

"It is as well to know them. One cannot tell how soon they may come into service. And the pass-words too, for that matter. Have you got any deeper into it yet, Harry?"

"No," answered Harry, as he drew his chair closer, and bent more intently over the diagram.

"Work it out, if only for love of me. I am sick of it. Get Tom to help you."

"Not much," roared Tom in reply. "I ain't taking in jobs of that kind. I suppose you'll be bringing in the 'Boy's Own Riddle Book' next, and wanting me to sit down to it. Thank you, but I don't bite. I couldn't guess a riddle if I saw the answer staring me in the face."

"All right," cried Dave laughing. "I'll forgive you. Excuse me, Harry, I'll leave you to puzzle your brains, while I go out to take a walk."

Harry said nothing, but continued his close study of the diagram. After several minutes thus engaged he slapped his knee with a sudden movement of satisfaction, and turned partly around.

"Hand me that map of Philadelphia, Tom, will you?"

There was no answer. He looked around, Tom and Dave were both gone, leaving him alone in the room.

"I'll have to help myself," he remarked, rising. "Maybe I'm mistaken, but I've got an idea, at any rate."

He walked across the room and picked up a large book, containing a set of ward maps of the city of Philadelphia.

Meanwhile Dave Darnly strolled up Chestnut street, through the tide of sight-seers who were lounging up and down that fashionable thoroughfare. More than one eye was turned to observe him as he moved lazily along, some with a sneer, some with a glance of admiration.

With his well-fitting, dove-colored pants; his white vest, with the heavy gold chain trailed across it; his tastefully cut coat; the light kids that adorned his shapely hands; his well waxed mustache; and the slender cane which he twirled foppishly in his hand; the name of Dandy Dave seemed to exactly apply, and it was this that drew sneering remarks from some of the passers.

But there were others, especially among the ladies, to whom Dave's handsome face was a passport to admiration, to which his shapely and neatly attired form added.

But he walked on oblivious of both sneers and smiles.

The fact was that his mind was far from being at ease. The fate of Lucille Ernestine bore more heavily upon his mind than he was aware of himself. She had been wounded in seeking to shelter him from danger. He would have been no man if he could have viewed the uncertainty of her fate with indifference.

But there was more than that, Dave was warm-hearted and susceptible. He had not escaped from the influence of Lucille's beauty. The mystery surrounding her, the fact that she was in some way connected with that lawless gang of whose haunts he was in search, did not deter him. It rather, indeed, added to his interest in Lucille, and he found himself thinking more of her than he had ever thought of a woman before. Her impulsive exclamation, in which she acknowledged her love for him, yet rung in his ears, and met an answering response in his heart. Dave was decidedly falling a victim to the blind God of Love.

He walked on irresolutely, so wrapped up in his own thoughts as to pay little attention to what was going on around him.

"It's going to be life or death between me and those hounds," he said, shutting his teeth firmly. "So far they have hidden their track, but they will find it not so easy to throw a sleuth-hound from the scent. And then, if anything has happened to Lucille, let them beware! They will have Dave Darnly to deal with."

His gloomy thread of thought was broken by a light touch on his arm. In an instant he was alert. He turned with the quickness of one always on guard, and gazed into the face of the person who had touched him. It proved to be a woman, neatly but not fashionably attired, and of prepossessing countenance.

A look of recognition passed between their eyes, but not a word was spoken. She walked on as if the touch had been a mere accident, while Dave twirled his light cane in his foppish manner as he moved behind her, seemingly taking no notice of her movements. But they both

turned down the first side street, and proceeded onward until they reached a locality in which few persons were present.

Now Dave walked more rapidly and overtook the person whom he had followed.

"How d'ye do, Sue?" he familiarly greeted her. "You have struck oil somewhere, eh? I could see that much in your eyes."

"I don't know that there is anything in it," she quietly rejoined, turning her intelligent face toward him. "But it's a point, and every point counts in our line of business."

"Some move at the Masters' mansion, eh?"

"A most decided one. There has been a bitter flare-up between the young and the old Masters. The upshot of it all is that Bently Masters has turned his son out of doors. Completely disowned him. Cut him off without a shilling."

"The deuce!" ejaculated Dave. "That is a movement, in earnest! There is no mistake about it!"

"No. You know that I am hand and glove with the servants. One of them overheard part of the quarrel. It is kept quiet in the parlor, but it is kitchen gossip."

"And is the reason known? What has the young fellow done to be set adrift in this fashion?"

"I have my idea," she replied.

"I bet you have, Sue. There's not many can beat you seeing through things," was his complimentary answer. "But, what is it?"

"It has something to do with the young fellow's courting of Kate Thorndike. Old Masters may have wanted to break it up. But Will is a boy of mettle, and is not one to be turned from the track at a moment's notice."

"That is it, for a thousand!" cried Dave. "Come, something may be made of this. You must get on the boy's track, Sue. Or no, that's not quite in your line. Leave him to me, and do you keep up your watch on old Bently. Do you need cash?"

"I have enough for the present."

"Very well. The thing is ripening. We will get to the bottom of it yet."

He paused as some persons came near. It was two men, who were busily conversing, and who passed by without heed to Dave and his lady friend.

But Dave lifted his head with a quick movement, and gazed after them. He seemed intently listening.

"By Jove, Sue," he exclaimed after an instant. "I've struck oil again! I would know that voice among a thousand."

"Who is it?"

"It is the masked man I told you of, who shot Miss Ernestine, and rattled bullets around me. I never forgot a voice. Can I trust you to trail him, Sue? I am not dressed for duty of that kind."

She made no answer; but in an instant she was on the track of the man in question.

CHAPTER IX.

DANDY DAVE'S ADVENTURE.

THE keenest scout and the smartest detective are always liable to an error of calculation, and such was just now the case with Dave Darnly. He had miscalculated the intelligence of his foe, which is always a dangerous error. The two men who had passed him and Sue Dart in the street had apparently not noticed them. Yet Dandy Dave, when in full dress, was a figure very likely to attract men's eyes, and the passer-by had really seen and recognized him at a glance, although pretending not to do so. It may well be imagined, then, that he was keenly alive to the consequences. He had not failed to perceive that Dave's attention had been attracted to him, and the pursuit by Sue Dart had not continued for ten minutes ere the fox was well aware that there was a sleuth-hound upon his track.

Keen as the lady trailer was she was no match for her shrewd opponent. Rightly conjecturing that she did not know which of the two was the important one, he instructed his companion to glance nervously behind him at intervals, and act as if in dread of pursuit. After this had continued for some time the two men separated. The pursuer hesitated for a moment at this unexpected movement. She was, as they shrewdly conjectured, at a loss which of the two to follow. Her indecision ended in a pursuit of the one who had shown apprehension, while the other man walked quietly away, chuckling to himself to think how neatly he had cheated his foes.

He was well aware of the existence of the lady detective, and was very well satisfied to shift from his track this quiet-looking woman, who

followed him along the street with such an air of innocent attention to the shop windows.

"Hang their cunning!" he muttered. "Who'd have thought of being trailed by a woman? I fancy my lady won't make much by following the man she is after. It is like losing the scent of the fox and taking up that of the mouse. But that confounded steel-lined top of a detective knows too much. He is the only man on the whole force that has smelt out our path. He made a fool of that ninny of a girl, and now he has got me spotted so that I'm not safe while he's above ground. There's no use wasting time. There's only one thing for it. He must go under. Confounded fool I was not to slit his weasand when I had him in limbo before. It's come down to a question of life or death now. The heard little fancies he is digging his own grave by his sharpness. Let me see. How shall I bring him into my hands again?"

He walked on deeply thinking. Evidently the murder of a man or a dozen men was of slight importance to him as compared with the question of his safety.

Meanwhile Dave Darnly had continued his walk. Turning the corner of Broad and Spruce streets, he came unexpectedly face to face with a young gentleman whom he recognized at a glance.

"Will Masters, by all that's lucky!" he exclaimed. "Just the man I was thinking of."

Will, who like the most of Dandy Dave's acquaintances, was quite unaware of his business, and looked upon him as a fashionable young exquisite, wholly given to a butterfly existence, was not altogether pleased by this meeting. He was in no mood, just then, for any of the lively trifling of society.

"Come, my boy," cried Dave. "Why, you look as blue as double-distilled indigo. This will never do. You want a set-to at b'ards to waken you up. Or suppose we stroll to the club and sample that new sherry. I'm told it is prime."

"Excuse me," replied Will, distantly. "I have no time at present."

"Engaged in business, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a new role for you. Stop there now; I want to talk with you," and Dave planted himself before the gloomy youth. "What's up? Are you going to desert the scenes of your triumphs? Booked through for China, eh?"

"No; but for Colorado, or California," answered Will, firmly. "I have had enough of city life and want a taste of the free air of the West."

Dave looked at him curiously.

"And what, in the mean time, is to become of—you know who? I will not mention names?"

Will's eye kindled with anger.

"What do you mean, sir?" He turned sharply on his questioner. "How dare you meddle in my private affairs?"

"Oh, none of that, Will," and Dave carelessly switched his boot with his slender cane. Was I ever the man to meddle with my friend's business? I am only talking out of pure friendship for you, my lad. I know a little more of the world and of women than Will Masters. You fancy that you can meander at your pleasure through the West, and the girl will wait like a trusting little ninny till you choose to come back. Beware, my boy. You don't know them."

"I would trust her at the world's end!" answered Will indignantly. "Not that I recognize your right to meddle with my private affairs. Let this conversation end, sir."

"Oh, well! if you will have it so," with a shrug. "It's none of my business, of course. No doubt you both mean to be as true as steel to each other. Only— But no matter. Advice is wasted on trusting lovers. Good-day, and good luck in the wide West."

Will stood silent with flushed face as Dave turned indolently away. The youth could have struck his nonchalant friend, and the more so as the insinuations of the latter had not been without effect upon him. He was still more annoyed to see Dave turn before he had taken a dozen steps.

"Excuse me, Will," he said, "but there is another little matter. How about the child that was stolen? Mr. Thorndike's son and heir? Has any trace of him been found yet?"

"No," answered Will, with a hesitation which the quick eyes of the detective did not fail to observe.

"And yet you love this lost boy's sister, and are going to walk off West without an effort to aid the distressed family in its search? I am ashamed of you, Will Masters."

There was a ring of contempt in Dave's voice.

as he again turned and walked away, leaving the youth deeply stung by his words. He had walked nearly a square before he looked back. Will was still standing on the spot at which he had left him.

"He will not go West," said Dave to himself, "that is settled. I have put a bee in the young man's bonnet that will sting him to some decided action. He knows something bearing upon this abduction. I am sure of that. I must set myself to worm it out of him."

Yet keen and wide-awake as Dave was, he was likely to need all his shrewdness before many hours. He was playing his cards before old gamesters, and it was a question which would yet win. Things were already in train which would try his coolness and his resources to the uttermost.

At a later hour that day Sue Dart made a report of the result of her mission. She had tracked her man to the Alleghany Hotel, and had left the house shadowed. But on her describing the separation of the two men, and the behavior and appearance of the one she had followed, Dave was convinced that she had pursued the wrong party.

"But he is one of them, that is sure, from his actions," said he. "We must keep him under our eyes. The finest thread may lead to the biggest rope, if it is only followed."

On reaching home that evening, he was handed a letter, which had just arrived by mail. He opened and read it, noticing that it was in a strange and somewhat cramped hand. Its contents were as follows:

"If Mr. David Darnly will call at No. 79 Hilton street, at an early hour to-morrow, he may hear of something to his advantage, and may be aided in a matter which he has at heart. Let him be silent, and burn this after reading it, for the life of the writer will be in danger if this communication be known. Unless he come alone, and act in all respects as herein desired, he will find no one there. If he act with good faith he will profit by it."

There was no signature, and some effort had been made to disguise the hand.

Dave looked at this curious document for some time, while a busy flow of thought passed through his active brain. Was this the act of a foovor a friend? There was evidently danger in such a mission, yet the writer might be in earnest; it was no uncommon event for a rogue to betray his associates.

It was very plain that it referred to some of the several criminal jobs which Dave had in hand, and he was not at all inclined to give up the chance of gaining the important information hinted at. On the other hand, there might be deadly peril in the enterprise. He had many enemies, and some of them might be seeking this means to revenge themselves upon him.

"But I hardly think I am the man to step back from a shadow of danger," he said, as he balanced the letter on his finger. "I have been in more than one bad scrape in my time, yet here I am alive and well. I calculate I can pull through. If I take a force with me I shall be very likely to find the house empty. Poh! there's an adventure in it, and adventures are my meat. Here it is, right or left. If it drops to the right, I will try it on."

He held up his finger with the letter balanced upon it. It rested steady for a moment, and then slowly toppled over, and fell to the right.

"The right has it. Chance has got me into it, let chance get me out of it. I will take on the adventure."

A night's sleep did not change his resolution. In one particular, however, he did not obey the directions of his correspondent. He was not verdant enough to burn the letter. On the contrary, he replaced it within the envelope, and redirected it to "Tom Parsons, Central Police Station."

"If I am not here by twelve o'clock," he remarked, "take this letter instantly to its direction, and tell Mr. Parsons that I left home at nine o'clock this morning. He will know what to do. If he is not there, ask some of the other officers to open it."

This arrangement made Dave dress himself more suitably for the enterprise in hand, donning a suit of strong, dark cloth, and leaving all his foppish airs behind him with his dandyish costume.

"I am not going to play the fool to-day," he remarked with a smile. "It is men I have to deal with now, not women; and I fancy this will do my work better than a soft tongue."

As he spoke he placed a small, silver-mounted revolver in his pocket, first trying the chambers to see that they were all charged.

"When a lamb goes among the wolves the

lamb should have the claws of a wolf," he laughed. "Here goes for my adventure."

No one would have thought from Dave's aspect that there was such a thing as peril in the universe. He nodded or chatted lightly with the friends he encountered, on his way to the desired region up-town.

Hilton street was in the thinly built-up portion of the city, and consisted of a few houses, separated by a considerable spread of open lots. No. 79 stood alone, with an open space of some width on each side of it. He looked at it with some curiosity.

It was of three stories high, a narrow, plain, respectable brick building, of the medium class. There was certainly nothing suspicious about it, particularly in full day, with the sun shining upon it and through its open windows.

"Deuce take it, I doubt if there's to be much of an adventure after all," thought Dave, as he walked to the door and boldly rung the bell. An ill-favored woman, with a masculine face, answered his ring.

"She looked at him questioningly.

"I have an appointment here this morning," explained Dave. "Am I not expected?"

"You're the gentleman then as was to call?" answered the woman, in a hoarse voice. "You're to come right in, please."

Dave followed her as she led the way into the house, his eyes taking a critical survey of her appearance.

"A strapping woman that," was his mental comment. "And ugly enough to turn sweet milk sour. What under heaven are such creatures ever made for?"

"Will ye please walk to the sitting-room, sir?" she asked with a decided Milesian accent.

He followed up the narrow flight of stairs. At the top they passed a door, apparently of a bath-room. The room to which the woman led was in the rear portion of the house. The door was shut, and she stopped to open it. In doing so something suspicious in her appearance caught Dave's keen eye. With his usual alertness of action he grasped her shoulder and laid his hand upon his pistol.

"So, my pretty friend, you are masquerading, eh? That's well done, my chap, but I'm not the sort for you to play the woman dodge on. It won't go down."

With an oath the disguised fellow turned and made a quick grab at Dave's arm. But he had the wrong metal to deal with. That arm shot out like a bolt from a catapult, took him in the right temple, and sent him sprawling half across the floor of the room whose door he had just opened.

"You can't play that on me, my friend," said Dave.

He had no time for other words, for, at the same moment, a fierce blow fell upon his head, the room before him swam for an instant in his eyes, and then he fell like a log to the floor, utterly insensible.

The blow had come from a hand armed with a slung-shot, that suddenly emerged through the half-open door of the bath-room.

CHAPTER X.

THE READING OF THE RIDDLE.

"By all that's blue, Tom, I have it!" and Harry Hill started up with a look of immense satisfaction. "Talk about your riddles; I never saw one yet that I couldn't guess if I gave it the time."

"And I never saw one yet I could guess, if I gave it a century," answered Tom Parsons, as he moved up, curious to learn the solution of the mystery.

"It is all a question of brains," answered Harry, as he cast a quizzical look at Tom.

"No doubt. I've got enough of the kind, but mine ain't that kind. But what is it? I'm all alive to know."

The curious ring diagram was spread out before them. Tom gazed at it in hopeless uncertainty.

"I suppose it's pass-words, and grips, and all that, as Dave says," he averred. "I see through all that. But I can make no more of your spider web than a cow could make of a persimmon. It's Choctaw of the worst kind."

"See here," answered Harry, pointing to a page of the city map which lay open. "Look at the run of the streets here. This broad line is Diamond street. Here's Germantown avenue. Here's Poplar street, Girard avenue, and so on. Have you got the hang of them?"

"Suppose I have, what then?"

"Just get the run of the streets in your eye, and then take a look at this diagram."

Tom did so, but stood scratching his head in hopeless bewilderment.

"I am looking at them," he blurted out. "But I'll be shot if I can see anything in them."

"Is there not a resemblance?"

Tom's eyes opened with a sudden light. He slapped his head vigorously.

"Hang my stupidity! I ought to knock myself down, for want of some other fool to practice on. Why they are the same thing. The confounded mystery is nothing more than a map of the twentieth ward of Philadelphia; and I was a jackass not to see it at a glance, for I know that region considerably better than I know the catechism."

"It's the twentieth and the wards above. It's nearly the whole northern side of the city, in fact."

"But what, in the name of Moses, does any fool mean by drawing out a map of the city in short hand, covering it up with grips and pass-words, and hiding it inside a finger ring? The clearer it gets the more ridiculous it grows. And these dots, red, white and black?"

"Are houses."

"As sure as you live they are!" cried Tom, as enthusiastically as if he had made the discovery himself. "This big spot is at the corner of Tenth and Milton. It's the Blue Blade Hotel. And here's Jack Sprout's, at Mervine and Park. Both shady quarters. I've had my eye on them for many a day. There is something in it, after all. Have you made it all out, Harry?"

"You bet I have."

"Then shell out. I'm dying to know."

"It's just the biggest thing that's been dug up these ten years. We fancied we were well up in thieves' head-quarters, Tom, but here's a guide to twenty new places that we never dreamed of. That confounded gang that has been making Rome howl for the last year or two has nothing to do with our Philadelphia regulars. I was sure of that before. But if I ain't mistaken we are on their track now, and have all their haunts spotted."

"Why, yes," said Tom doubtfully, still looking at the diagram. "There's a good deal that's queer about it yet, though. What do you make of the grips and pass-words, and the different colors?"

"There's a word opposite every house," answered Harry. "That shows that each house has its own pass-word. And at the top you see there's three different grips, each opposite a different color. You see the use of the diagram now, with its different words and colors. If you'd try the white color grip at one of the black or red spots you'd stand a chance of being spotted with a knife-blade for your pains. It's a very neat contrivance, Tom. These dens are, no doubt, marvels of innocence outside. But every one of them has its thieves' chamber, that nobody can enter without the grip and pass-word."

"And what's in your eye, Harry? A raid in force?"

"I hardly know. We must first consult with Dandy Dave. It's his mutton."

"But where in the world is he? He was to be here by ten o'clock this morning."

"And he is generally prompt to time."

"Except when he gets his eye on a pretty woman," answered Tom, laughing.

"What is it, my boy?" asked Harry, turning to an intelligent-looking little fellow who had just entered, and was gazing around inquiringly.

"I'm wanting Mr. Parsons," he said. "Is there a Mr. Parsons about here?"

"That's me," answered Tom.

"Then I was to give you this," and he handed Tom a letter in an open envelope.

Tom, seeing that it was addressed to himself, took it out and read it, a queer expression coming upon his face. He mused a little over its contents.

"I'll bet high that Dave has got into trouble," he at length remarked. "He was always too venturesome, and this looks confoundedly like a trap. Read it, Harry."

Harry did so, knitting his brows over the strange epistle.

"It looks blue," he said.

"How came you to bring it here?" asked Tom of the boy.

"My uncle Dave said if he wasn't home by twelve o'clock, I was to bring the letter to Mr. Tom Parsons, and he'd know what to do."

"What time did he go out?" asked Harry.

"About nine o'clock."

Harry looked at Tom, and gave a low whistle.

"Squally weather," remarked Tom, with a grimace.

"Thunder and lightning in the offing," re-

to Tom. "That will do, my boy. We will tend to it."

The lad left the room with a look of satisfaction. If these two big men promised to attend to it, it must be all right.

"No. 79 Hilton street," Harry fixed his eyes on the diagram. "Look here, Tom. This line should be Hilton street. And 79 should be about here."

"A red dot, sure as shooting," exclaimed Tom. "It's one of the dens of the gang!" Dave's been roped in, my hearty. Here's the grip. And the password is 'Death.' Whew! I don't like that!"

"No more do I. We must move like lightning. Every minute tells. You take it in hand, Tom. It's just the job for you. Take half a dozen men and strike for No. 79."

"Trust me for that," answered Tom, as he tossed on his hat, and thrust a pistol into his pocket. "Dandy Dave, alive or dead, that's my motto. And if they've done him a harm let them look out!"

He left the room with a quick step, and a stern look upon his face.

But we must return to Dave whose absence had created this sudden movement in his friends. Was he yet in the land of the living?

At the moment in which we left him he had just fallen stunned and helpless to the floor, knocked prostrate by a terrible blow upon the head.

How long he remained in this insensible condition he never knew, but when he recovered he found himself seated in a strong arm-chair, to which his hands and feet were firmly bound.

Ne'er him were two men, one of whom he quickly recognized as the person who had been manquering as a woman. The other was a savage-faced, ill-favored chap, upon whose countenance was a continual scowl.

It took several minutes for Dave's senses to fully return, during which he was in a dazed way taking in his surroundings. He found himself in a very sparsely furnished room, with a single window before his eyes, through which other houses were visible at no great distance.

After a few minutes' inspection he turned to his captors, who were curiously regarding him. All his native coolness had returned. He was one who always rose to the level of danger.

"This is very neatly done, my good friends," he remarked, with the utmost ease of manner. "But there was no need to truss up a fellow quite so tight. You might have left me room to move."

"You're a bit too handy with your fists," replied the chap who had felt the weight of Dave's right hand.

"Poh! that was only a little love tap. Just to get acquainted, you know. If I'd hit hard there wouldn't have been a grease-spot left of you."

The man addressed looked silly for the moment. Then he broke into a laugh.

"Well, you're a jolly one, I swear! Do you know, my funny fellow, that you've brought your pigs to the wrong market?"

"Hardly, my lad. I'm only an invited guest here. This is a ridiculously warm way of greeting a guest. I suppose you were afraid I might not wait for the company. You needn't have troubled yourself. I'll wait."

"I've a notion you will," grinned the man.

Dave looked around him irresolutely. It was important to gain time. Every minute might count with him.

"We might as well spend the time pleasantly," he next remarked, with a smiling face. "Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes." "Then just put your hand in my left hand pocket. You'll find some cigars. Or if you don't like to put your hand in another man's pocket just untie my hand and I'll get them for you."

"I ain't got no objections that way," grinned the man, as he thrust his hand into Dave's pocket and drew out the cigars.

"That's clever. There's nothing like making yourself at home. Help yourselves, gentlemen. Give me one of the cigars. I don't mind smoking with you, being as you are such jolly company."

The two men looked at each other, and their faces broke into a broad grin. They hardly knew what to make of this queer chap.

In a few minutes more they were all three smoking, Dave puffing away at his cigar with as much apparent unconcern as if he was really with a party of his best friends. He was too wide-awake to ask these fellows about their object in capturing him. In fact he preferred to stave off business till the last minute possible.

If he could only amuse his keepers for an hour or two more he would have the game in his own hands. By that time Tom Parsons would have his cue.

"How do you like them?" asked Dave.

"Blamed good cigars," replied the man. The other had not yet spoken.

They puffed away in silence for several minutes.

"If we only had a pack of cards," remarked Dave easily, "we might have a neat game of euchre. I suppose you play?"

"You bet. But I guess you couldn't do much without your hands."

"You could untie one of them, you know. You'd never find me running away from a social game."

The fellow laughed.

"A neat coon, you are," he said. "But when we get our coons we keep them."

"What's the use of all this blasted chirr music?" growled the other man, now speaking for the first time. "We ain't got time to stay here all day palavering."

"That's so," returned the first, rising from his seat, and coolly knocking the ashes from his cigar. "Fun's fun, and business is business. You're jolly good company, you are, and I'm kind of sorry to break up our talk, but we've got to look after business."

"Business, eh? Deuce take business!" ejaculated Dave. "Sit down and smoke, my lads. To the dogs with business."

"Maybe you don't surmise what our business is?"

"I don't care a fig what it is."

"I thought you might be interested in it," said the cool villain. "It's only to knock you in the head, to be sure, and to put you under the ground."

"And as quick as thunder," broke in the other, with a coarse oath.

He rose from his chair and walked to a closet at the end of the room, from which he took a heavy bludgeon.

Dave's eyes opened wide. Affairs were certainly approaching a perilous point. He resolved to put into practice an idea which he had been turning over in his mind for the last ten minutes. It might work.

"Well, this is a decidedly rough way for breaking up a social chat," he said.

"We ain't got time to parley," answered the man in an apologetic tone.

"You'll let a fellow write a letter to his friends, at any rate?" asked Dave.

"It mightn't get to them," said the man.

"Oh, I'll trust you for that."

The two villains winked at each other.

"I guess we'll let you write it," remarked the spokesman. "Tain't much of a favor."

At Dave's further request he was supplied with paper and a pencil, and one hand was released in order that he might write. The two men stood by keenly watching his every movement. He wrote with apparent difficulty a half dozen lines.

"And now, my dear sir," continued Dave, taking a small piece of sealing-wax from his vest pocket, "will you be kind enough to soften this wax and drop it here? I always put my seal to my letters."

The fellow willingly did so, lighting a match and softening the wax in its flame.

"Just here, please." The melted wax fell in a red spot on the paper. Dave pressed down upon it something which he had taken from his pocket.

"I fancy that will answer," he quietly remarked. "You may read the paper to see that it is all right."

He handed the document to the man, and leaned back easily in his chair, though his eyes remained fixed keenly upon his villainous captors.

A strong doubt was in his mind as to the effect of his scheme. But it was quickly dissipated as he saw their eyes open to their full width, while an ashy whiteness came over their faces.

"The seal of the grand lizard!" gasped the first.

"Death to him who disobeys its orders!" faltered the second.

"So, bounds!" cried Dave, in a voice of stern authority. "You would kill me, then? Release me on the instant, if you would escape the fate you have merited!"

With nervous haste one of the men drew a sharp knife across the prisoner's bonds. He sprung to his feet, a free man once more.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEXT MOVE IN THE GAME.

WILL MASTERS had not gone West. He had even given up his intention to go West—at least,

for the present. The skillful hints of Dave Darnly had had that much effect upon him.

"I have more reasons than one, dear Kate," he said, in an interview with his lady love. "Of course you are one, and not the least of those reasons. But I know you would wait for me, no matter how long I was gone. There is another matter that will not wait."

"What is that?" she asked, looking up with a smile.

"It is the question of your lost brother," he replied. "I deem it my duty to stay here and aid in the search."

"Oh, thanks! thanks!" she cried, with warm enthusiasm. "We have taken every means, and all in vain. It seems as if we shall never find him. I fear you will have no more success."

Her voice suddenly sank into deep sadness.

"I may," he rejoined, with gloomy resolution. "I have some reason to fear—" he paused for a moment, as if he could not go on. "I fear—that my own father had something to do with this robbery."

"Your father?" she heard him with open lips and distended eyes.

"My father," he replied, with more firmness. "It is only a vague suspicion, Kate. Yet I feel I have duties even greater than those to a father. You know his hatred to your family. You know he discarded me because I would not give you up."

She pressed his hand in silent acknowledgment.

"He spoke of hatred and revenge. I fear he may have sought to strike your parents otherwise than through you."

"Oh, Will! this is terrible!" she cried.

"It is terrible to me," he responded, in a low tone. "It is not that he has turned me out of doors. I would have taken the same steps if I had been fifty times an inmate of his house, with my present suspicions."

"But, what do you know, Will? What have you learned?" Her voice was full of eager interest.

"It may be nothing. You will keep it secret?"

"Yes, yes!"

"It is simply this, then. One year ago, at the time of your brother's abduction, my father was absent from home for several days. On business at Pittsburg, as we were given to understand. I remember, now, that Jacob, the saturnine coachman we had then, was absent at the same time. And I have just learned that our carriage was taken out after dusk on the day of my father's departure, and did not return until late in the next day. On that same evening your brother was stolen."

She listened to him with clasped hands. Her long-lost and deeply-mourning brother; was a clew to him to be found at last!

"But do you know nothing more? How shall we discover what has been done with him?"

"The coachman left us shortly afterward. But I have lately learned where he now is. He may be induced to tell the truth about that mysterious expedition?"

"Oh Will! if you do find our poor Clarence, I will—I will love you ten times more than I ever thought I could! My poor father and mother! you cannot tell how deeply they have mourned!"

"I shall do all I can," he resolutely replied, "no matter who suffers. I would be a helper in the crime if I did less."

She pressed his hand, and looked up into his face with eyes that swam with warm thankfulness and love.

But we must return to the others of our characters. We left Tom Parsons just setting out to the rescue of his endangered friend. He was destined to be disappointed. On reaching the house to which Dave Darnly had been inveigled, he stationed part of the small force of men who accompanied him around it, so as to watch every avenue of escape. With the remainder he made his way into the house. There was no difficulty in this entrance. The doors were unlocked, and readily yielded to his touch. Drawing their pistols the searching party made their way slowly through the silent mansion.

No sign of life appeared. The house seemed deserted. It was but sparsely furnished, and gave the appearance of having been temporarily occupied for some special purpose. A few minutes sufficed to search it from top to bottom without the discovery of a living being.

"Confound it all!" cried Tom, in a rage. "This is a complete sell. Have they knocked Dave in the head and buried him in the cellar? Or have the hounds suspected this movement and carried him off to some other den? We must look closer, lads."

They went over the house again, examining it with professional acumen.

"See here!" cried one of the men, as he pointed to a spot just outside the door of the room to which Dave had been taken. "It is blood, as sure as you live!"

Meantime Tom had picked up a strip of linen from the floor at the other end of the room. He examined it critically.

"These two are tied together, and by no fool of a knot," he remarked. "And it has been cut in two through the middle with a sharp blade. Look around, Joe. See if you can find more of the same kind."

The man addressed looked into the closet adjoining, and there on a heap of rubbish, found two similar cut strips, and a third one which seemed to have been knotted and afterward untied.

Tom surveyed these significant bandages with the keen eyes of a detective.

"It has a rascally suspicious look," he considered. "I should imagine that somebody has been bound hand and foot, and then suddenly released. They have untied one of the bonds, and then got tired of that, and taken the knife to the others."

"And here's a half-burnt candle and a bit of sealing-wax," remarked another, taking these objects from the mantle, "and the match by which the candle was lit."

Tom seated himself, with these objects in his hand, and looked at them long and earnestly. His brows knitted curiously as he sought to extract some meaning from these vague indications.

After a few minutes thus employed he started quickly to his feet.

"Come, lads," he said, decisively. "Our man isn't here, that's flat. The hounds have carried him off, and I am afraid it will puzzle us to tell how and where. But we must try to get on his track."

They left the house together. At the same time a man, who had been carelessly standing by the fence a short distance down the street, moved from his station and quietly strolled on to the next corner. This point reached, he concealed himself behind the fence, from which shelter he was able to observe the movements of the party of officers. It was evident that the villains had their scouts out.

What, meanwhile, had become of dashing Dave Darnly? We left him, in the last chapter, just freed from his bonds, through the influence of the lizard seal upon his keepers.

The two men looked upon their late prisoner with affrighted eyes.

"How could we know that you were the chief?" asked one, tremblingly. "We got our orders from the sub-chief of this district. We did not dare disobey them."

"If you had, I should have ordered you to execution," he replied, in a tone of authority. "The orders of the brotherhood must be obeyed. I am here on a secret mission," he continued, "and must not be known. Do not, on peril of death, reveal my presence, even to the brotherhood. You may invent some story of rescue to account for my escape."

The faces of the two ruffians lighted up. The secret brotherhood was certainly stern and severe in its punishments, to put these hardened men in such mortal terror.

"Will we be protected?" asked one of them humbly.

"Yes, I will answer for your safety."

He coolly lit a match and rekindled his extinguished cigar. A glass hung against one side of the room. At this he carefully adjusted his necktie, and ran his fingers through his hair, which had been disarranged.

"You had better get away from these premises," he said to the men. "They might prove dangerous. But don't follow me too soon. I prefer not to be seen in bad company. We law-abiding citizens have to look out for the character of our associates."

With a light laugh he proceeded toward the door of the room, the two villains following him with scared and wondering eyes.

But escape was not to be made so easily as he imagined.

For at this moment heavy steps sounded on the stairs, and before our nonchalant friend could reach the door it was flung open from outside, and four men walked into the room. At their head was one whom Dave recognized at a glance as the leader of his former captors.

The tableau was an interesting one. The newcomers gazed with bewilderment on the freed prisoner, who was walking away so coolly from his two keepers. A look of fury came into their leader's face as he looked at these men.

"Traitors!" he hissed. "Is it thus you obey orders? Have you forgotten the penalty of treason?"

Dave, after a slight start on beholding this new danger, had relapsed into his previous nonchalance. He continued to smoke, regarding the new-comers with easy assurance.

"Do you want me?" he quietly asked.

"I fancy so," was the grim response.

"All right. I never object to good company." He took the opportunity, as his face was partly turned to his previous captors, to make them a warning gesture. "As for these good fellows," he continued, "you needn't be angry with them. They are not the keenest witted chaps in the world, as I had just convinced them that they had got hold of the wrong man. If you hadn't been so awkwardly out of order in your visit I would have walked out with a whole skin. Why weren't you kind enough to have business elsewhere for ten minutes more?"

The leader of the gang looked at the speaker, the anger in his face slowly giving way, until he burst into a grating laugh.

"Hang me, if you don't take things coolly!" he ejaculated. "Snatch him, men! He is as sharp as a steel-trap, and cunning as a fox. Snatch him!"

Dave's quietness, in fact, was that of the volcano. He was on the very point of leaping on his foes, and opening a passage to the stairs with his sledge-hammer fists, when they leaped upon him in response to this order.

He did strike a brace of blows, sending one fellow headlong to the floor, while a second reeled back against the wall. But the others were too quick to permit him to use his fists again. His arms were caught and hampered, and struggled as he would not escape from these strong foes. The two who had felt the weight of his fists were on him in a moment, and despite the athletic young man's utmost efforts, his arms were drawn back and bound behind him.

His two former captors had stood irresolute during this movement. But for the gesture of warning he had made them they would have come to his rescue. As it was they fancied that the chief of the lizard fraternity must have strong reasons for wishing to preserve his incognito.

At this moment the bell of a neighboring clock struck the hour of twelve. The leader of the villains started. Time was rapidly passing. Their prisoner might have left orders for pursuit. It would not do to dispose of him here. He must be removed to a safer place before a rescue could be attempted.

A hasty conference took place between the villains. It was followed by the dispatch of one of them down-stairs, apparently to see if the coast was clear. The prisoner continued to smoke as coolly as if he were at liberty. Evidently no immediate violence was intended, and he was not one to worry over distant trouble.

In a few minutes more he was conducted down the stairs by two of his captors. The leader turned to the two men who stood with pale faces awaiting the conclusion of this scene.

"Follow me," he harshly commanded. "You may have been deceived by this keen-witted fellow. We shall see. I will give you an opportunity to prove your faith to the brotherhood."

A dark cloth was thrown over Dave's head, and he was rapidly hurried from the door of the house. In a moment he was forced into a carriage, which evidently stood just before the door. It was driven rapidly away.

This journey lasted for half an hour, when the carriage again stopped. He was taken from it with the same precaution, and felt that he was being led into another house. The door closed with a clang behind him. He was again a prisoner.

CHAPTER XII.

A FRIEND ON THE OUTSIDE.

MEANWHILE, in other directions, things were moving on. The effort to discover the robbers of Knight & Rogers's store was yet without any visible results. The authorities, of course, had clews; they always have clews, or profess to have, which answers the same purpose with the gullible public. In fact, however, the matter yet remained a complete mystery.

In other quarters events were in motion. Sue Dart, Dave's lady associate, was gradually progressing in her object. She had made herself so agreeable to the female members of Mr. Masters's household that her visits there were gladly welcomed, and she was gradually getting bits of useful information from these loquacious ladies. The kitchen usually has a shrewd idea of what is going on in the parlor, and the kitchen is ready to talk where the parlor would prefer to keep silent. This Sue very

well knew, and she was wise enough to seek information by the back door in regard to the secrets of the front portion of the house.

Without his dreaming of it, a set of suspicious circumstances was slowly being woven around Bently Masters. There was something very secret and mysterious in many of his movements. It might be important to have him watched in his expeditions. At Sue's suggestion a police scout was put upon his track, and his every movement shadowed.

At the same time Will Masters was engaged in hunting up Jacob, the man who had acted as coachman for his father at the time of the abduction.

There was no great difficulty in finding him. He was now driving for a Mr. Tompkins, of Logan Square. But unfortunately for his quest Jacob had had his eye teeth cut, and did not respond to pumping worth a farthing. He was absolutely ignorant of any such circumstance as that to which Will sought to call his attention. Yes, he might have driven out at night, and on a certain occasion. Couldn't say that he had or hadn't. Had a very treacherous memory, and could not, for the life of him, recollect anything of the sort.

Will, at last, left him in despair, and with the feeling that the silent Jacob had been paid to him a bad memory. Likely, if anything was to be got out of him, it must be by some other means.

With this brief glance at what is going on elsewhere we must return to the adventures of Dandy Dave, whom we left in a somewhat unpleasant predicament.

But Dave had been in many a predicament in his life, and had always proved equal to the occasion. He had, in fact, escaped from very serious peril within the last two hours, and therefore, when he now found himself locked up in a close room, he felt very little dread of the possible results.

"I bet high that Tom Parsons is scouting for me now," he surmised. "Poor Tom! he is born to disappointments. He is wide-awake though, sometimes, and may succeed in tracking me to this den. At any rate I will find some way to get out; and meanwhile I think I will take a nap to pass the time. It's confounded tiresome waiting to be hung or shot. Heigh-ho! I'd like to be out of this, and on a fishing trip down the Delaware just now. But I suppose there's no salvation for the wicked."

Casting himself on a lounge that occupied one corner of his room the reckless fellow was soon sound asleep. Nor was there any vision of gibbets or pistols to disturb his slumbers. On the contrary he dreamed that he was out with a party of jolly fellows, catching Delaware perch as fast as he could draw up his line.

He was roused from his slumber by a sound at the door. Opening his eyes lazily, he saw that a man had just entered the room, bearing with him the requisites to a good meal.

He arranged the dishes leisurely upon the table, fixing his eyes curiously upon the recumbent prisoner.

"You here!" he remarked. "Have they trusted you again?"

"I'll!" cautioned the man, with his finger to his lips. "There are others on guard. But they are friends of mine, and I got the privilege of bringing in your meals. What are we to do, sir? I and my partner are ready to do anything you order. Do you want to keep secret yet?"

Dave deliberated a moment.

"What is in the wind?" he asked. "Any more skull-cracking plans, eh?"

"Not just now," answered the man cautiously. "But there may be to-morrow. We don't know the counsels of the chiefs."

"That is all right," replied Dave. "Keep at hand. I will tell you when to act. You had better go now. They might suspect you if you linger here."

The man had reached the door on his departure when a low sound from the prisoner's lips caused him to turn. A new thought had come to Dave's mind.

"Is there not," he asked, "with this division of the brotherhood, a young lady named Lucille Ernestine?"

The man slightly started.

"I have seen such a lady," he answered. "I did not know—"

"Yes," interrupted Dave. "I have let you into a secret, which you must carefully keep. The lady was badly hurt, perhaps killed, a week ago. I have no late advices of her condition. I wish you to find out, secretly, and report to me."

The man hesitated a moment.

"Can I show the seal of the chief, if necessary?"

"Yes. If necessary. Not otherwise."

Again making a sign of silence the man left the room.

"Good, so far," said Dave turned to his supper with an appetite. "You can lock your doors to your heart's content, so long as I have a friend on the outside. The fellow verily believes me the chief of this brotherhood of scoundrels. If I can only keep him quiet now, and work my game well, I may get to the bottom of the biggest thing that has turned up for the last twenty years. But the fate of Lucille is the first thing to learn. I will risk all the rest for that."

Imprisonment did not spoil Dave's appetite. He was not long in making way with the plentiful supper which had been provided.

But sleep did not come as soon as usual that night. The long nap which he had taken in the afternoon,

and the anxiety which he felt about Lucille, kept him long awake. There was a hope in his mind that his emissary might return with some tidings, and he waited with all a lover's suspense while the slow hours glided by.

Sumber at length ended his long vigil. It was full morning when he wakened. Dave's sleep was a little like that of the cat. The least unusual noise awakened him. It was now the opening of the door that called him to consciousness.

He looked up eagerly. It was the man he hoped to see. He brought with him the prisoner's breakfast.

"I could not come before," was his cautious remark. "I had to have some pretext."

Dave restrained his impatience while the man arranged the table. It would not do to display too much eagerness. He leaned back in his easiest attitude, and quietly watched the movements of his visitor.

The latter quickly accomplished his task, and then approached.

"I have found her," he said, cautiously.

Dave's heart leaped, but he forced himself to be calm.

"Alive or dead?" he asked, in a tone of unconcern that told little of the feeling at his heart.

"Alive, and well. She was only slightly hurt. She has recovered.

"Thank God!" was the mental ejaculation of the hearer, though no sound passed his lips. He remained silent for a full minute, his heart throbbing with joy.

His emissary waited in silence for his next orders.

"It is necessary that I should see her," Dave at length remarked. "There is important business of the brotherhood which requires that we should have an immediate interview. Can you bring her here?"

"Doubtful," the man responded. "I will try. But suppose she refuses to follow me? What shall I tell her?"

"Here," answered Dave. "Give her this. You will need nothing more."

He took the lizard ring from his pocket, and wrapped it carefully up, without letting the man see what it was.

"But if the guards refuse to pass her?"

"Don't fear. She will bear a token of authority which they dare not refuse. Hasten now. Every minute is important."

The man left, with a look of satisfaction upon his face. It was no light thing for him, one of the humblest members of the great brotherhood in cruce, to become the trusted emissary of their dreaded chief.

Again the slow minutes passed by. Breakfast was soon dispatched, though not without some apprehension of poison in the food. Yet he had sufficient trust in the good faith of the man who had brought it to take a certain amount of risk, particularly as he had a marvelously fresh appetite just then.

"I trust my man will not fail," he remarked, as he uneasily paced the room. "But there may be a dozen things to hinder. Why didn't I have him bring me a pistol or knife, or some weapon? I may have to fight my way out yet."

The minutes lengthened into hours, and still he kept up his uneasy walk. At length the sound of voices came to him from beyond the locked door. He listened eagerly. Was that a woman's soft tones?

For several minutes, the conversation continued. Then he heard the slow opening of the door. He stood with eager eyes.

In a moment more it was thrown open. A silken shamer came from the shadowy space beyond; the gleam of a remembered face.

With difficulty he restrained himself. He saw this figure advance into the room, with a face changing from pale to red. He heard the closing of the door, and the sullen click of the lock. And then he started forward.

"Lucille!"

"David!"

In a moment they were in each other's arms, his eyes on that dearly-loved face, his lips on that sweet mouth.

"Mine! Mine again!" he exclaimed. "Though I mourned you as dead!"

She said nothing, but yielded in happy content to his warm embrace.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE THIEVES' TALISMAN.

Tom Parsons's efforts to track the abductors of his friend proved futile. The marks of carriage-wheels were found just outside the door, but they were quickly lost. Inquiry proved useless. No one had observed any special carriage. The passing of carriages in that locality was too common to excite any attention. Tom was utterly baffled, and returned to the city quite crestfallen, after leaving a man to watch the suspected house.

"Dave hasn't been here?" he questioned Lieutenant Hill, on reaching the police head-quarters.

"No. Has he escaped?"

"I am afraid not. Only he's such a slippery coon that I thought maybe he might have slid through their hands. They'll be wide awake if they get the best of Dave Darnly, now I tell you."

"But what did you discover? It looks as if they had countermarched on cute Tom Parsons."

"Yes, confound them. But I'll tell you all about it."

He proceeded to describe the result of his investigation. Harry listened with deep interest, and remained silent for some time after the story had concluded.

"Well, that's the whole of it," said Tom, im-

patiently. "What's to come next?" I thought you'd be ready with some good idea."

"It is this party that Dave has been trailing that has carried him off," suggested Harry.

"It don't need a prophet to tell that."

"Very well. We have the whole thing here in a nut-shell," and he laid his hand on the diagram.

"No doubt he has been taken to one of their dens.

"What follows? We must make a raid on them."

"By thunder, yes!" cried Tom, springing up and cracking his heels.

"A good thought. I knew you'd hit the bull's-eye."

"A raid in force," continued Harry. "You have already one of their dens under guard. There are just twelve more, according to this diagram. We will strike them altogether, and in force. Say a half-dozen good men to each, with a wideawake leader."

"Good," answered Tom. "I'll take one. If we only knew how to use the pass-word and gripe we might walk into their affections before they knew what was up. I'll take this red spot for mine. I think I know the place. It's a lonely sort of old mansion, on Meeting House Lane, well out of the city. Just the place they would be likely to take a prisoner to."

"Red. That means war, Tom. I'll take this white spot for mine. I go for peace, you see."

"And I for war to the knife," answered Tom hotly. "These coons have got to look out for themselves when I go for their mutton."

"You bloodthirsty wretch!" laughed Harry. "But I leave it to you to work it up, as I have other affairs on hand just now. It will take all afternoon to organize the parties. We can make our descent in the morning."

"I doubt if they'll relish a very early call," returned Tom. "But leave it to me. I will get the thing in shape before night."

He turned to leave the room, but was hindered by the opening of the door, and the entrance of a person well known to him.

"Good-afternoon, Sue," he said, as that trim little woman entered. "Glad to see you. On business, I suppose?"

"Yes," she briefly answered. "Where's Mr. Darnly?"

"Gone up," returned Tom. "Fallen among the Philistines. If you've got any fish that wants quick frying you can't wait for Dave. Is it something about that trail he put you on? The Masters job?"

"Yes," she responded. "But I don't understand. Where is Mr. Darnly?"

Harry, who had just stepped up and greeted their lady visitor, explained. Sue's face grew long as she listened, for Dave Darnly was one of her special admirations.

"We've got them nailed, though," Harry concluded. "Don't fear but that Dave will be free again before noon to-morrow. But what have you learned about that other business? You can safely let it out. Tom and I know the whole affair."

Sue proceeded to tell that Bently Masters had been followed on one of his expeditions, and had been traced to a camp of Gipsies, which had recently come into that neighborhood.

"I doubt if it was to have his fortune told," she continued. "I have learned that a party very similar to this was in the same spot a year ago, about the time that young Thorndike was stolen. They have not been seen since until now."

"That looks suspicious," remarked Harry. "But if it was they that stole the child they would hardly have brought him back with them."

"I have looked through their camp, as far as I could without creating suspicion," continued Sue. "But I can see no young folks there but a lot of copper colored little vagrants. There is none that could possibly answer to young Thorndike."

"That is not so sure," answered Tom. "These rascals can easily make black white. They would not be long in changing a fair skin into the deepest coffee color. Where is this camp, Sue? Here is a city map. Point out the spot on it."

After some minutes' careful examination Sue put her finger upon a point near the right border of the map.

"This must be about the place."

Harry looked at Tom significantly, and laid his hand on the diagram.

"Here it is," he remarked in a low tone. "A black spot. Are these Gipsies in the gang?"

"Looks confoundedly like it," muttered Tom.

"You had best strike out then.—All right," he continued, turning to Sue. "I will see that our Gipsy friends are investigated. But it had better be left till to-morrow. Then we will likely have Dave Darnly to help us. It is his job, and I would rather not take it out of his hands."

This idea suited Sue to a fraction, for she had a most exalted idea of Dave's abilities. She left with an intention of keeping a close watch on the roving fortune-tellers in the hope of some possible discovery.

By night Tom Parsons had everything prepared for the intended raid. There were twelve places to be visited and searched, and for this twelve parties were organized, consisting of six men each, a detective officer being at the head of each party.

Ten o'clock of the next morning was the time fixed for the raid, a simultaneous descent being intended, so there could be no possible warning given. There was good reason to believe that a part or the whole of Knight and Rogers's lost goods might turn up, as a result of the enterprise. The two organizers of the party felt quite sure that something would be found to justify their descent, if it were nothing more than a kit of burglar's tools.

Ten o'clock sounded from a hundred clocks throughout the great city. The raiding parties who

had long since been ready, moved up, and quickly placed sentinels around the suspected mansions. The remainder moved toward the doors.

Tom Parsons, on account of the isolation of the mansion he had chosen, led a somewhat larger party than the others. At the stroke of ten a number of these were placed on guard around the house. This proceeding was unobserved from within, for no person was visible at door or window of the mansion.

It was a large, old fashioned, stone house, surrounded by various out-houses, and might have been a residence of some of the nabobs of the period of the revolution. If so, time and neglect had sadly reduced its ancient dignity.

Tom Parsons, with the remainder of his party, drew up to the open front door of this mansion.

While these efforts for the recovery of Dave Darnly were in train, that worthy was not resting easy under the strain of imprisonment. The discovery that the lady of his love was still living, and her entrance to his prison, had for the time driven all other thoughts from his mind. But, the first transport of joy over, the question of escape became again a prominent idea.

"Something must be done, Lucille," he said. "I do not care for myself, but your entrance here may endanger you if these ruffians learn of it. Can we not devise some plan of escape?"

A smile came upon her face.

"Trust me for that," she replied. "The signet ring will be our 'open sesame.' Not a man here will dare to disobey it. Have you used it, as I advised you?"

"Yes, and saved my life by its use."

"I would not have credited that fellow you sent to me but for the ring," she replied, as she showed it to him upon her finger. "We will try its effect upon his associates."

A significant knock which she gave upon the door caused it to be opened from outside. A stern-faced fellow held it half open, while he gazed within.

"Do you wish to come out?" he asked.

"I wish for myself and Mr. Darnly to go free," she answered in a haughty tone.

The jailer laughed derisively.

"Hardly," he replied. "There is no objection to your going. But he has not got his discharge papers yet."

She made a gesture, which caused a look of surprise to come upon his face.

"By whose orders?" he asked.

"By the orders of the Lizard Chief."

"No, no, my lady. That will not do. I am under orders now of the sub-chief."

"This cancels all minor orders."

She lifted her hand and held before his eyes the ring that glistened upon her finger.

The man fell back as if he had been struck. His eyes distended in astonishment. The ring acted like a talisman.

At a signal from Lucille's hand Dave followed her through the open door. They found themselves in a sort of ante-room, which was occupied by four persons. The prisoner instantly recognized two of them as his keepers of the previous day. The third was the man who had just started back from the door. The fourth now rose and came forward.

"What in the fiend's name does this mean?" he exclaimed.

"Back! on your life!" ordered Lucille, confronting him. "Do you dare question the signet of the chief?"

The ring flashed before his eyes. It had the same effect upon him as upon the others. He fell back with a like gesture of astonishment. There seemed to be a wonderful potency in this mysterious ring.

The captive walked through his keepers with as much impunity as though they had been smitten by a lightning stroke. He deigned not to look at them as they moved with respect from his path. But he was not destined to escape so easily.

For at this instant the outer door suddenly opened and two men entered the room. One of them was the man who seemed to act as leader of this division of the gang. The other was a stranger, a man of small frame, but with the eye of a hawk, and a look of stern resolution about his mouth.

Lucille fell back, with suddenly paling face, as her eyes beheld this visage.

"What does this mean?" asked the leader sternly. "Are you all bewitched? Yesterday I found two of you setting this stranger free against my express orders. To-day two of my most trusty men are turning traitor. What am I to understand by this?"

"We dare not disobey. We have been ordered to release him on the authority of the lizard seal."

"Ha!" cried the leader, with a start.

"Hold!" came in a calm, stern voice from the stranger. "So, Lucille Ernestine," he continued, turning with a sneer to the pale woman, "this is your handiwork. It is to this use you have put my ring? Have you forgotten the penalty?"

"I have not!" cried Dave, snatching a revolver from the pistol-pocket of a man near him. "Protect me, men! Down with these traitors! On the authority of the ring I command it!"

The four men, somewhat irresolutely, ranged themselves at his back. For a moment it looked as if the two intruders would be overborne. But the stranger did not move a step, or change a line in his countenance. He simply threw open his coat and revealed a peculiarly shaped badge.

"I am your chief," he said, in a loud, commanding voice. "The ring was stolen. Seize them both. They are traitors to the brotherhood."

Dave raised his pistol menacingly, but it was dashed from his hand. He was instantly seized by the men who stood behind him. The badge had produced a yet more powerful effect than the ring.

Lucille, with hasty resolution, sprung for the f

pistol. She had just grasped it, when there came a sound of steps without, and a quick knock upon the door.

A significant look passed between the two leaders. The chief signed with his hand to the door. The other turned and put his lips to the key-hole of the portal.

"Who comes?" he asked.

"A friend," came in deep tones from without.

"No friend can enter without a name."

"Milton," came back through the door.

It was the correct pass-word.

The speaker rose and opened the door a slight interval. He extended his hand through the opening. It was grasped from without in a peculiar grip.

"Our friend can enter," he said, loosening the strong chain which yet held the door, and which he had adjusted before opening it.

"Hal! what treachery is this?" he exclaimed, as he saw the face of the man without. "Help, here! We are betrayed!"

He pushed the door to with all his strength, and sought to fasten it. But at that instant there came a quick, sharp report, and his arm fell helpless to his side, pierced by a bullet.

It was Lucille who had fired. She had revenged herself for the wound which this man had given her on a former occasion. The chief sprung to take the place of his helpless confederate at the door, but he was too late. For there came a surge upon it from without, which flung it wide open, and a half-dozen of resolute-looking men, pistol in hand, rushed into the room, Tom Parsons at their head.

"Down, ye hounds!" he cried. "The man that draws a weapon is nailed! Hal! Dave! Are you there?—Surrender, ye light-fingered rogues, or we'll make mince-meat of you all!"

Some of the men looked as if inclined to fight, but the gleam of that array of pistols, and the stern faces behind them, was too perilous a fact to dispute. The chief recognized the uselessness of resistance. He was standing by an open window, through which he suddenly sprung. Tom ran to the opening, but he had already leaped again from a shed on which he had landed.

"Let him go. The boys below will nab him," he said, philosophically. "We've got you out of the woods, Dave, and that's our main object."

CHAPTER XIV.

DAVE AFTER THE GIPSY'S.

At every point the raid had been successfully made. Some of the houses, however, were empty. Others contained only innocent seeming families, with no trace of any contraband materials. But in several instances suspicious-looking persons were captured, and material found that had apparently been stolen. Here and there, also, the implements of burglary were discovered.

But the most essential find was made at the den which Tom Parsons had raided. Although the chief of the gang escaped, his subordinate and four others had been captured. And a close search of the house revealed the strongest evidence of their guilt. For in a cunningly concealed closet which was discovered in one of the upper rooms a perfect mine of stolen goods appeared. And among these was a rich display of watches and jewelry, which there was no doubt in Tom's mind formed the spoil of the late robbery at Knight & Rogers's store.

In another place of concealment a plentiful array of burglar's tools was unearthed, consisting of drills, chisels, wrenches, dark lanterns, and all the paraphernalia of this unlawful trade.

"Hang me, if we've hit such a bonanza for a century!" exclaimed Tom. "It's just the greatest turn-up that I've ever had the good luck to see."

"And thank your stars you came when you did," answered Dave, "for things were getting very squarely when your lucky knock came on the door."

Tom had already sent off for reinforcements, and dispatched his prisoners under a strong guard to the city, while another force was left in possession of the house.

We have said that the raid was completely successful. This is a slight error. As we already know, one of the suspected points was occupied by the Gipsy's camp. It had been simply intended to put this under surveillance, until a force could be gathered strong enough to safely search it. But when the party chosen for this duty reached the ground it was to find that the Gipsy's had decamped, and that only the *debris* of the camp remained to attest their occupation.

It was not long before Dave was put in possession of all the facts which had transpired since he had been made prisoner. These comprised the deciphering of the diagram, the raid upon the dens of the burglars, the new facts which had been discovered in relation to the abduction of Clarence Thorndike, and Sue Dart's suspicion of the Gipsy's.

"Then I'm your man for that," cried Dave earnestly. "Trust me to interview our distinguished visitors from Egypt. I've a notion I can outgipsy them, keen witted as they are."

Taking Lucille to the city and leaving her with some friends, Dave proceeded to put this important object in train. He soon learned of the removal of the Gipsy camp, a fact which, in connection with Bently Masters's late visit to it, increased his suspicions. As for Sue Dart she too had disappeared. Tom's idea was that she was in pursuit of the Gipsy's.

"Sue will watch them like a cat watching a mouse," he affirmed. "There is no danger of their suspecting her, for she is just brimful of Gipsy's. They don't know what a fox they've got on their track."

"I don't suppose it will be very hard to track

them," remarked Dave. "I am after them hot-footed. But I want to get my eyes on Will Masters first. He may have learned something."

He was wide awake enough to make his first inquiries for Will at the house of Mr. Thorndike, shrewdly conceiving that his lady-love would be best aware of his place of residence. As it proved, however, Miss Kate was not at home. She had gone out for a walk on School Lane, a beautiful rural street adjoining Mr. Thorndike's residence.

Dave quickly took the same direction, with a strong suspicion that he would be most likely to find Will Masters in this manner. Nor was he wrong. He had not gone far ere he perceived the object of his quest, in company with Kate Thorndike. They were strolling along with all the intimate confidence of two young lovers.

They started slightly, and drew a little apart, on hearing a voice accost them.

"Excuse me," said Dave. "But I wish to speak with you on a subject of importance. I have heard something, Miss Thorndike, which may possibly lead to the finding of your lost brother."

"Oh! have you?" she cried, with clasped hands. "Heaven grant that you may succeed! Will you not tell me what you have discovered?"

"Not at present," he quietly replied. "It is too indefinite. But Mr. Masters was on the same quest. I wish to know if he has learned any thing."

"I have not," rejoined Will. "There is a person from whom I expected to gain some information; but I have failed to do so."

"It may not be necessary," answered Dave. "And there are reasons why it would be best for you to take no further step in the matter. I fear it comes too nearly home to you. Can you, Miss Thorndike, give me any points by which I can recognize your brother? Or is there any household word or song which will arouse recollection in him?"

"Yes, yes!" she eagerly replied. "There is a lullaby which we used to sing him. It goes in this way."

She sang a few lines in her fresh young voice, Dave humming after her in order to catch the tune.

"That will do," he said. "I think I have it. He was a little, blue-eyed fellow, was he not?"

Kate gave him a minute description of her lost brother, an account colored perhaps by love, but from which Dave managed to extract a clear conception of the child's appearance.

"Thanks," he rejoined. "That is all I will need. I hope I may be successful."

"Heaven send you may!" she fervently replied.

The further quest in search of the Gipsy band did not prove so easy as Dave had imagined. He traced them with no great difficulty for some twelve miles from the city, but at this point he lost the trail. They had probably made a night fitting, since none appeared to have observed them.

A little nonplussed he continued his inquiries, through the villages and at the farm-houses, until he had gained a point about twenty-five miles out. He was passing, in a vexed frame of mind, through a rural hamlet called Merton, with a strong inclination to greatly widen his circle of inquiry, when he suddenly encountered what seemed a familiar face.

It was a young lady, dressed in a light summer silk, who played her parasol very coquettishly as she passed him, while a pair of laughing eyes were fixed upon his countenance.

He passed her, however, but he had not gone far before he turned back, with that indefinite sense of recognition which one so often feels. The lady had turned back at the same instant.

A puzzled look from Dave; a slight smile upon her face; and then he burst out with hasty energy,

"Sue Dart, on my life! And I'll be shot if she didn't shut up my eyes with her masquerading! Well done, Sue. I didn't think you could do it."

"You don't know what I am equal to you see," she saucily replied.

"But what brings you here, girl? You were tracking the Gipsies. You have not let them give you the slip?"

"I fancy not," she laughingly replied. "I thought you knew me better than that."

"They are near here, then?"

"Not three miles off. They are encamped in the woods there to the left."

"Good. But what are the developments? Has anything turned up?"

"Nothing sure," she responded. "I begin to fancy that I am suspected, and have come to this town to change my character. Would you like to have your fortune told?"

"Yes, I've a weakness that way."

"Wait for me, then, I will be with you in ten minutes."

He waited with patient, curiously surveying the country folks who passed, and as curiously surveyed by them in turn. Dave, with his tasteful attire and florid air, was a spectacle of a kind not often seen in that rural region.

The country folk were at least stalwart and healthy, and the girls lissom and rosy. He stood easily resting upon his cane, and surveying the passers.

"Now there's one with the walk of a Juno," he said to himself. "There's nothing like country air and country living to bring beauty to a woman's frame, and the glow of health to her cheek. That once now—"

He paused in his soliloquy, for there was an undoubted smile upon the girl's lips.

"Hang me for a ninny if it isn't Sue Dart again!"

"Mebbe ye'd like to have your fortune told, good sir?" asked she, with an awkward shake of her calico skirts, and in a most rustic dialect.

Dave laughed merrily.

"The girl is a real genius," he affirmed. "We had best not be seen together, Sue. You go on, I will follow you at a distance."

"I'm not at all afraid of a good looking gentleman's company," answerd Sue, with a laughing smirk.

She turned and walked with the free step of a country lass out of the village. Dave let her get a considerable distance in advance before he leisurely followed.

Three miles of a country road on a warm spring day is no trifle, and our city friend was a little relieved when he saw, close at hand to his left, the strip of woodland to which Sue had pointed. Just then a light carriage came whirling rapidly up the road. The single occupant gazed curiously out upon him as he passed. Dave returned the gaze. There was something familiar in the man's face, but he could not tell what it was.

He had now reached the skirt of the wood, and saw Sue apparently waiting for him. There was an earnest look upon her face.

"Did you see him?" she asked, in a low, eager tone.

"See whom?"

"Bently Masters."

"Hal!" cried Dave. "He in the carriage?"

"Yes."

"By Jove, the play is thickening! I have never seen him before, but I know him now by his resemblance to his son Will. Things are working, Sue. Where is this camp?"

"Just off here in the woods."

"All right. We had better stroll in separately."

In a few minutes they found themselves in the midst of a strange scene. A half-dozen long, low wagons, near which their well-fed beasts industriously cropped the grass. One or two long, oval tents made of a dirty brown canvas. In their midst some dark-skinned, tramp-like men stretched lazily upon the ground. In the foreground were several ill-favored women, who sought to induce a group of curious rustics to have their fortunes told.

As the two new-comers strolled in from opposite directions these Sibyls sought them as more promising metal for their skill.

"My fortune, eh?" said Dave to one of the youngest of these dusky-skinned women. "Very well. I wouldn't mind knowing what's to happen to me, if you can only promise me any good luck."

He held out his hand, over which the woman bent, intently observing its lines. But with little heed to what she was saying or doing, his eyes roamed the precincts of the camp, particularly observing the children, of whom there were a full dozen, of various ages. But there was not a face or form among them that bore any resemblance to that which Kate Thorndike had described.

Paying the woman for her profuse promises of good luck and happy life, so which Dave had paid not the slightest heed, he edged over toward Sue, who was playing the part of a country girl to perfection.

The group of rustics, encouraged by the good fortune promised him, were now, with many a laugh and blush, investing their loose shillings in the fortune-mongering of the dusky Gipsy maidens.

"I don't make out the child," Dave cautiously whispered. "If here he must be kept in concealment."

"Hist!" cautioned Sue. "Bently Masters is here. I just caught a glimpse of his carriage through the trees, and one of the Gipsies has gone down in that direction."

In a few moments the man returned. He whispered something to the other men, who were in an instant upon their feet. Dave judged from their movements that there was an immediate intention to break up the camp.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAMP OF THE GIPSY'S.

The women of the Gipsy camp were still engaged in telling the fortunes of their rustic visitors, while the men lazily employed themselves in preparations for departure. Evidently enough the visit of Bently Masters was at the bottom of this movement. Dave ran the affair through his mind as he strolled about the camp. Was it the raid on the burglar which had caused this alarm? If so there could be little doubt but that the stolen child must be in the hands of these strollers.

He hummed lightly as he walked leisurely about, taking great apparent interest in the movements of the dusky wanderers. His low-hummed tune became louder as he moved around to the rear of the tents and the wagons. There was no one here but two or three of the frolicsome children.

He was singing the lullaby which Kate Thorndike had taught him. As he did so his keen eyes moved from point to point, heedfully watching every indication. Were the curtains of the wagon nearest him moving? It seemed to him so, as he sung more loudly a verse of his song.

The canvas covering was indeed moving. It was partly pushed aside by a slender arm. A small dusky face appeared at the opening. Dave continued to sing, but his hand was raised with a gesture of warning. He had recognized the blue eyes and regular features of Clarence Thorndike. The lost child was found!

The childish face drew back at his warning gesture. His song ceased as he worked back toward the group of Gipsies. The men were engaged in slowly harnessing their horses.

Dave spoke a few words in low tones to Sue Dart. She started and her face grew deeply flushed at his words. They drew aside, and held a short, earnest conference, after which they separated. Dave again

approaching the group of men, while Sue edged carelessly around toward the rear of the camp.

Five quiet minutes passed. The women were still occupied with their deeply-interested audience. Whistling lightly, and with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, Dave stood watching the lazily-moving men. At this moment, a cry of alarm, in a childish voice, arose from behind the wagons. The men started. One of them ran hastily back, unheeding the gentlemanly-dressed visitor, who managed to stand directly in his way. The consequence was that he stumbled over Dave's foot, and fell headlong and sprawling to the ground.

He immediately scrambled to his feet again, a fierce curse breaking from his lips.

"You stupid donkey," he began.

Before he could get any further, Dave's hand came with a ringing slap across his face.

"I don't allow any road tramp to talk to me that way," he said.

The man's eyes glared. He half drew a wicked-looking knife. The other men ran forward as if inclined to take part in the fight. Instantly a pistol gleamed in Dave's hand.

"If it's to be six to one, I'll balance the odds with a few bullets," he remarked.

But the childish cries continued, and a couple of dirty-faced little vagabonds came hastily running in.

"She's nabbed the Kid! She's nabbed the Kid!" they cried.

A look of fear and anger passed over the faces of the Gipsies. Several of them sprung forward, and ran hastily around the wagons. Dave's eyes followed them. There was no sign of Sue.

He had been simply seeking to gain time. But now, paying no further heed to the Gipsies, he moved off through the woods in the opposite direction. In a minute or two he had left the camp behind him, and was in close proximity to Bently Masters's carriage, which stood just within the edge of the woods. Its occupant was not visible. He had apparently gone deeper into the woods, with his Gipsy associate. From the direction of the camp came loud cries, mingled with curses.

Dave looked anxiously through the trees. But his eyes lightened up when he saw a woman's form approaching him with the speed of the fabled Atalanta. It was Sue Dart, who had made a rapid *detour* in the forest, and was hastening to gain the carriage. Through the folds of her shawl was partly visible the head of the rescued child.

"Quick!" cried Dave, hastily cutting the strap that confined the horse. "Gloriously well done, Sue. In with you like lightning, for the wolves are on your heels."

He led the horse into the road as he spoke. The sound of shouting and cursing voices grew nearer. He sprang into the carriage himself and seized the reins.

"Bend low," he cautioned. "These fellows are desperate. There may be bullets flying."

A sharp touch with the whip and the horse leaped forward, just as the noisy pursuers broke into the road a few yards above.

"Stop, or we'll check you with a bullet!" came a loud, threatening voice.

A mocking laugh was all Dave's answer.

A bullet came whistling past, while the swift-footed Gipsies leaped forward like hounds on the track of the rapidly trotting horse.

"Halt!" came in yet sterner tones.

"That is Bently Masters's voice," said Sue.

Dave drew his own weapon as a bullet passed through the rim of his hat. He set his teeth firmly, and touched the horse more keenly with the whip. The animal sprang suddenly forward, by good fortune perhaps, for the sound of a volley of pistol-shots was heard behind them at the same moment.

"You will have it then!" he angrily exclaimed, as he turned and fired back at the noisy pursuers.

There was a loud cry; a man threw his arms up wildly into the air; and then they saw no more. The horse had dashed around a curve in the road, and the infuriated pursuers were no longer visible.

"Good for our side, Sue!" cried Dave joyously. "We have distanced the rascals. And one of them, I fancy, has got his rations. You have struck the right child!"

"Trust me for that."

She threw off the enveloping shawl, and revealed the pretty face of a boy of some six years of age, who was clinging desperately to her, while his eyes were full of fright. His face had been stained of a dirty yellow by his captors, but the likeness to Kate Thorndike was evident at a glance.

"You won't let them have me again?" asked the child plaintively.

"No, indeed, my boy. They shall never have you again. That shot told, Sue. They have given up the pursuit."

We must hasten over the remainder of our story. We have carried our characters forward to the culmination of their purposes. The dens of the burglars have been discovered, their gang dispersed and partly captured, and the proceeds of several large robberies regained; among them the whole of the stolen goods of Knight and Rogers.

And now, through the aid of Dave Darnly and his shrewd associate, Sue Dart, the lost child of the Thorndikes has been happily rescued.

We can scarcely describe the joy that reigned in that household when their recovered darling was placed in their arms, or the heartfelt thanks which were showered on the heads of the keen-witted and fortunate rescuers.

But there are other events of importance to be yet described. Dave Darnly lost no time, after reaching the nearest town, in leading out a party for the capture of the Gipsies, on the charge of

child-stealing. He was too late, however. They had decamped, and were already miles away. But they had left behind them a dread record of the late fight.

This was the body of a man, stretched cold and dead on the fallen leaves of the forest, his face covered with a dark cloth. On the removal of this, Dave recognized, with a start of surprise, the face of Bently Masters. His return bullet had struck home, and brought down the ringleader of the desperate gang of kidnappers.

Further efforts were made to arrest the remainder, but in vain. It was found that they had abandoned their camp equipage and disappeared, and no trace of their after movements could be discovered.

As for the arrested burglars, the evidence of their guilt was too abundant to leave a shadow of defense in their favor. They were, in the modern and expressive phrase, railroaded into the penitentiary, each of them for a long term of imprisonment. The chief, however, had escaped. After his alert leap through the window he had overturned the policeman who sought to stay his flight, and darted away into regions unknown, perhaps to reorganize the remaining branches of his wide-spread brotherhood of crime.

There was one mystery yet to be cleared up. Greatly as Dave Darnly had learned to love Lucille Ernestine he could not reconcile this feeling with his knowledge of her mysterious connection with the burglars. He lost not a moment in earnestly questioning her in regard to this matter.

Her answer was a long one, though we will only trouble the reader with its main points. She was a native of New Orleans, an orphan, having lived there with some distant relatives. They had introduced her to a gentleman calling himself Russell Smith, who had paid earnest court to her.

But there was something repellent to her in his manner, and a mystery about him which made her still more disinclined to accept his suit.

He had seemed infatuated with her, and finally, on the strong persuasion of her relatives, she had accepted his suit, and had received from him as engagement ring the mysterious circlet which she had subsequently given to Dave.

Before the time fixed for the marriage, he had come to her in great haste, with the story that he had to leave New Orleans at a moment's notice. He requested her to meet him in Philadelphia at a fixed date.

She had, consequently, come North, and, by his directions, had called at a certain house and shown the ring to a party described to her.

She was astonished at its effect, and at the obsequious manner in which all the persons in this establishment treated her. They, however, trusted too much to her previous acquaintance with their character, and were lacking in caution. It was not long, therefore, ere she discovered that she had been thrown among a gang of burglars and that the ring she bore was the all-powerful signet ring of their chief.

It was about this time that Dave Darnly made her acquaintance, and that she inadvertently let fall some hints which his quick wit caught up, and which led to all the stirring subsequent events described in the foregoing pages.

She had never loved Russell Smith however. It was her own sense of loneliness, and the persuasion of her relatives, which had induced her to accept him. And now she would never have him; now, since—

"Since you have met me, and found one whom you can love for himself," cried Dave, clasping her in his arms. "I should advise Mr. Russell Smith, if he wants to have a healthy time, to keep away from here."

There were two other lovers who had become equally happy. Every obstacle had now been removed from the path of Will Masters and Kate Thorndike, and there was nothing in the way of their happy marriage.

It is true that the joy of Kate in her recovered brother was somewhat clouded by Will's grief at the terrible death of his father. But such a feeling, under such circumstances, could not long survive. He was no longer an alien to the home in which he had been born and in which he had passed his childhood's years, while the large estate of his father was now all his own.

And so our story ends with two happy marriages, that of Will Masters with Kate Thorndike, and that of Dave Darnly with Lucille Ernestine.

We will not venture to say which of these was likely to prove the happiest, for both pairs lived in a continual honeymoon. Dandy Dave however, still continued in the service, and is always on duty when a piece of work of peculiar delicacy or intricacy is to be handled, while his friend, Tom Parsons, is still always ready to lend a hand when any sort of rough work turns up.

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